

Little Ones in Libraries: Symposium on Early Childhood Library Services

February 25-26, 2016



Public Library Services Branch

Alberta Municipal Affairs

“The experience children have early in life — and the environments in which they have them — shape their developing brain architecture and strongly affect whether they grow up to be healthy, productive members of society” (qtd. in Lynch)



Fast Facts

- Nearly all of the public library boards in Alberta have identified early childhood programming as a key priority when consulting their communities and developing their plans of service.
- Between 2006 and 2011, Alberta’s 0-4 year old population increased by 21%. There were 245,000 preschoolers Alberta in 2011 (qtd. in Lynch).
- As identified by the **Early Childhood Development Mapping Project** Alberta, approximately 30% of pre-kindergarten children in Alberta are experiencing difficulties in one or more areas of development. Alberta children fall significantly below the national norm of approximately 25% (qtd. in Lynch).
- Children have knowledge about reading and writing before they can actually read and write.
- Research shows that a child’s environment can affect how and if genes are expressed: “scientists have discovered that early experiences can determine how genes are turned on and off and even whether some are expressed at all” (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child 1).

Introduction

Public Library Services Branch (PLSB) hosted “Little Ones in Libraries: Symposium on Early Childhood Library Services” on February 25-26, 2016. The impetus for the symposium was feedback from the library community on the need for more opportunities to learn about early childhood development/literacy and greater access to hands-on services training for library staff.

In 2014, PLSB identified early childhood literacy as a key priority for both the Government of Alberta and Alberta’s public libraries. In 2015, PLSB consulted with librarians and library staff about how to best support libraries in providing early childhood literacy programs at the local level. The consultation was done through discussions at conferences and meetings as well as through an online survey sent to all of the public libraries in Alberta. Over and over, librarians said that they needed training and program delivery support. “[We] would love to see an early literacy library based conference...a library based conference would be valuable for resources and program training,” said one survey respondent.

The “Little Ones in Libraries” symposium was an overwhelming success, with over 75 participants representing public libraries from across Alberta. In the two days, we learned about early brain development, the state of early childhood development in Alberta, and the role of the public library. What follows is a summary of what we heard at “Little Ones in Libraries.” To access all the available material from the symposium, please visit the PLSB website: albertalibraries.ca.



Survey Results: Alberta Pre-Kindergarten Library Services

In 2015, PLSB administered a survey to all of the public libraries in Alberta to get an overview of how libraries serve the under-5 population. 130 responses were recorded. The full findings are available on the PLSB website: albertalibraries.ca.

The survey confirmed what PLSB had discovered in a review of library boards' plans of service and what PLSB was hearing from the community: early childhood literacy/programming is a key priority for the majority of Alberta municipal library boards. 82% of the respondents offer pre-k programs and 71% have staff devoted to children services.

However, the survey also highlighted marked gaps in the following areas: policy direction, budgetary considerations, consultation of authoritative sources, formal training in the provision of early childhood library services, and consistent early childhood programming schedules. Some findings to consider:

- 85% of the respondents do not have formal policies specifically related to pre-k services.
- 86% do not have a specific budget line for pre-k programs.
- 62% do not consult literary resources when making purchasing decisions.
- 85% do not refer to guidelines or standards when planning pre-k literacy programs.
- Of the 71% identified dedicated children services staff (see above), less than half have received any formal training in early literacy.
- Only 45% offer pre-k programming on a weekly basis, and only 19% offer pre-k programming on an ongoing basis.

The most common challenges reported in the survey are: space, staff time, and formal staff training. Many libraries draw on local community partnerships to address these challenges. The most frequently cited partners were: Family and Community Support Services Association of Alberta (FCSSAA), Parent Link, local and national literacy organizations, schools, and daycares. Some other interesting partnerships include: hospitals, other libraries, and “everyone in the community who is willing to partner with us,” said one respondent.

The survey provided PLSB with an overview of the successes and the challenges in public libraries serving the pre-k population; this information helped shape the symposium.



Symposium Big Thinkers: Key Messages

The two days featured presentations by experts in the fields of early brain development, the **Early Childhood Mapping** Project (ECMap), emergent literacy, play, and the delivery of early childhood programs and storytelling. A brief summary of each presentation and the key takeaways follow.

How to Build a Brain

-Dr. Nicole Sherren

Nicole Sherren is the Scientific Director of the Palix Foundation and a Program Officer with the **Alberta Family Wellness Initiative**. Her area of expertise includes experience-based brain development, neurodevelopmental disorders, and brain plasticity. Dr. Sherren's opening session described the ways in which brains develop in the early years and discussed the effects of trauma on early brain development. Early trauma has significant impact on the brain and has long-reaching implications for the child.

Key Takeaways:

- Infants are hardwired for social interactions.
- Serve and return interactions with adult caregivers shape brain architecture.
- Executive function is the skill-set learned in early childhood that allows children to navigate the world. This skill-set is based on cognitive, social, and emotional competencies (attention, memory, self-regulation, etc).
- Early adversity and life stress affects biology, behaviour, and impacts lifelong health.
- Early adversity increases the risk for: substance abuse, depressive disorders, adult heart disease, and numerous other challenges in adulthood.
- Genes provide a basic blueprint for development, but early experiences have a profound effect on future learning and behaviour.
- Early life experiences have the ability to change the proteins that bind to DNA and turn genes on or off; this is called epigenetic change and it can affect the way a person's genes work. There is evidence to suggest that epigenetic changes can be passed on through generations.
- For more information, please see the "How Brains are Built: The Core Story of Brain Development" video on the Palix website:
<http://www.albertafamilywellness.org/resources/video/how-brains-are-built-core-story-brain-development>



Mapping a Bright Future for Alberta's Young Children: ECMap Update

-Dr. Susan Lynch



Dr. Susan Lynch is the Project Director for the **Early Child Development Mapping Project** (ECMap) Alberta and is an adjunct professor in the Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta. Dr. Lynch's presentation described the ECMap project, the results for Alberta, and the future of the project.

From 2009-2014, ECMap gathered and analyzed data on more than 70,200 kindergarten-aged children, creating the first baseline early development results for Alberta. The Early Development Instrument (EDI) is the instrument used to measure development in kindergarten-aged children.

The EDI measures developmental progress in five core areas:

1. **Physical health and well-being:** being physically ready for school, not being tired or hungry, physical independence, gross motor skills, fine motor skills.
2. **Social competence:** self-confidence, the ability to play with others, and solve problems.
3. **Emotional maturity:** ability to concentrate and willingness to help others, ability to express emotions appropriately.
4. **Language and thinking skills:** interest in reading and writing, ability to recognize shapes and numbers.
5. **Communication skills and general knowledge:** ability to communicate needs and to understand others.

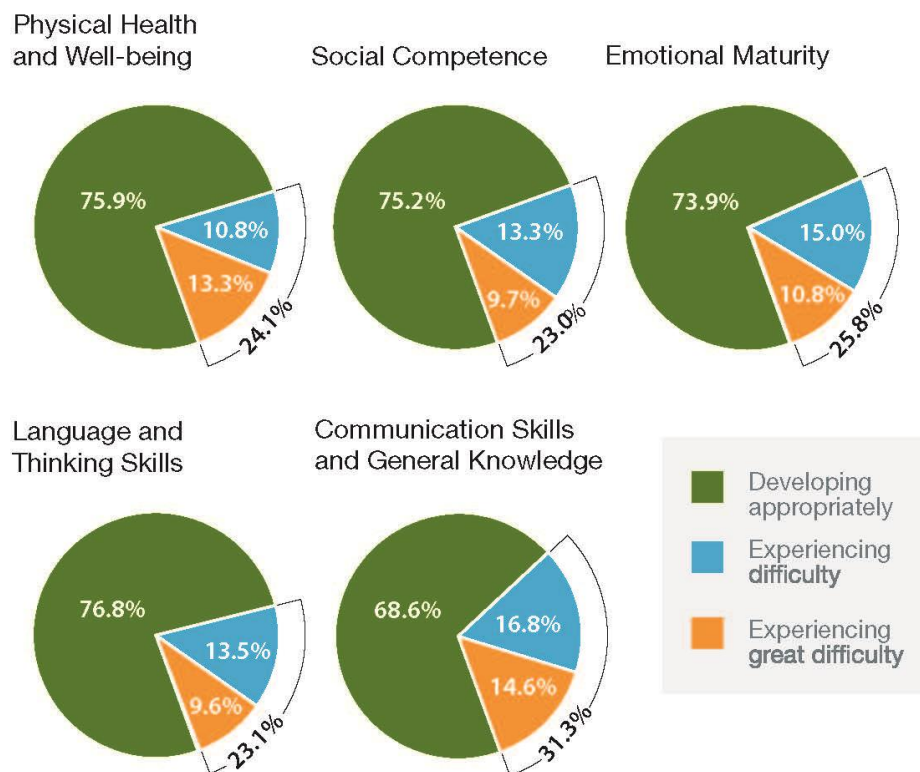
The data showed that only 46% of Alberta's children are developing appropriately in all of the five measured areas of development. The data also showed that 29% of children are experiencing great difficulty in one or more areas of development.

In response to these results, ECMap community development coordinators mobilized community coalitions across the province to work with the data and support positive outcomes. One hundred coalitions are now active throughout Alberta, raising public awareness about the importance of the early years and making a positive, informed contribution to discussions of how policies, programs, and other supports can be improved to promote the well-being of young children and families.

Dr. Lynch reported that there is, and will be, continued funding for coalitions supported by the Family Community Support Services Association of Alberta (FCSSAA). Significantly, a new round of EDI collection will happen in 2016.

Key Takeaways:

- Experiences children have in the first three years have a profound effect on their later development.
- Less than **50 per cent** of Alberta’s young children are developing appropriately in all five areas of development.
- Nearly **30 per cent** of Alberta’s young children experience great difficulty in one or more areas of development.
- 31% of Alberta children experience difficulty or great difficulty in communication skills and general knowledge.
- Alberta children fall significantly **below** the Canadian norm.
- EDI results vary a great deal across the province. This suggests inequities in early development outcomes in Alberta.



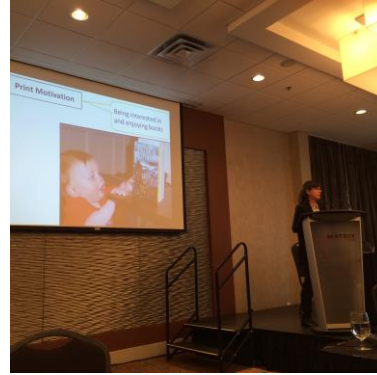
Alberta’s EDI results (qtd. in Lynch).

Facilitating Emergent Literacy Skills in Early Childhood

-Dr. Ozlem Cankaya

Dr. Ozlem Cankaya is a scientist with the **Alberta Centre for Child, Family and Community Research**; her research areas include early childhood experiences and outcomes. Dr. Cankaya's session outlined key components of emergent literacy and the main tenants of reciprocal teaching.

Emergent literacy consists of the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that are developmental precursors to reading and writing before children can read and write; it is the knowledge children have about reading and writing before they can actually read and write. The components of emergent literacy are: print motivation, vocabulary, storytelling skills, print awareness, sound awareness, and letter/alphabet knowledge. Facilitating emergent literacy helps children develop strong literacy skills and become successful readers. If children are exposed to reading and books early on they develop a positive attitude towards reading and they are better able to understand the function of reading. Further, children who start school with good basic literacy skills are more likely to become good readers and are less likely to drop out of school in later years.



Reciprocal teaching is a strategy developed in 1984 by A.S. Palinscar and A.L. Brown to help improve literacy skills and reading comprehension. It is an active reading comprehension technique. Reciprocal teaching helps to recognize and react to signs of comprehension breakdown.

The four main components of reciprocal teaching are:

1. **Predicting:** ask the child to make a prediction about what the book may be about or what will happen next;
2. **Questioning:** ask questions before and after reading;
3. **Clarifying:** together with the child, identify and clarify confusing words/vocabulary (rephrase if needed);
4. **Summarizing:** identify important/main ideas and summarize them in a few sentences.

Key Takeaways:

- Emergent literacy is the gradual process that takes place over time from birth until a child can read and write.
- All parts of language are interrelated.
- Reading exposure helps children develop better vocabulary, listening skills, and reading comprehension.
- Reciprocal teaching is an active reading comprehension technique that includes: predicting, questioning, clarifying, summarizing.

Play in Libraries: What's the Big Deal?

-Kristen Duke



Kristen Duke is the Service Design Lead – Early Literacy, at the **Calgary Public Library**. Kristen's session explored the reasons why play is such an important facet of children's early learning and the holistic development. Kristen offered advice on how to incorporate play into library settings and beyond. Based on Stuart Brown's book, *Play: How it Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*, the session outlined the importance of play for early childhood development. There are different kinds of play, and facilitated in a safe environment, play contributes to healthy development for children. The library can play an important role in facilitating play for children through programming and space planning.

Key Takeaways:

- Play is crucial in childhood development. It is one of the ways children learn about their environments.
- There are many different kinds of play. All are valid.
- Libraries can facilitate play through various programs and space considerations.



Carrying the Magic: Relationships in Early Literacy
Being the Magic: How to Find Your Growing Edge at Storytime
-Kevin MacKenzie

The symposium keynote speaker, Kevin MacKenzie is dynamic and emotive. He has been sharing his passion for storytelling, listening, creativity, and movement for over fifteen years. In his two sessions, along with some rhymes and songs, Kevin shared his experience as a professional storyteller. He discussed the importance of oral language as the most common and essential medium of communication. Kevin also took the audience through a hands-on, confidence-building exercise. The sessions with Kevin highlighted the fundamental discomfort that most of us feel when trying to facilitate a program for children. This feeling of discomfort and embarrassment is more common than we may realize. Kevin encouraged us to take comfort in knowing that nearly everyone feels this



way and that these are skills developed over time and with practice. Kevin reminded us that everyone communicates in a unique way, and encouraged us to find our way and trust ourselves. Most performance and communication challenges lay at the level of self-knowledge, self-acceptance, risk tolerance, and unconscious beliefs. The sessions encouraged all participants to accept and embrace the discomfort and go for it anyway.

Key Takeaways:

- “Sing a song, tell a tale, do a dance, show your bum, or out you go.” That used to be the challenge at ceilidhs. We entertained each other, and no one sat by (on threat of being “exposed”).
- Early literacy thrives on the bond between adult and child.
- Parents (and librarians!) need to be willing to risk. You can model for, include, and inspire adults in your circle time to become literacy deities for their children.



Library Programs and Partnerships

As a complement to the main speakers, the symposium also highlighted what is happening locally in Alberta public libraries. We listened to a panel discussion on community partnerships serving the under-5 population. We also featured 10-minute lightning rounds about early childhood library programming.



Community Partnership Panel:

1. Read and Roll

-Joanne Wicker, Lac La Biche County Libraries

In response to the ECMap results for the Lac La Biche area, Read and Roll was developed in conjunction with Lac La Biche County Libraries, Parent Link, and Alberta Health Services. Joanne also read us a story.

2. 1-2-3 You and Me

-Sheryl Pelletier, Shannon Public Library

1-2-3 You and Me is a program created in partnership between Shannon Library, FCSS, South Peace Family Literacy, and South Peace Area Rural Kids Early Development Coalition (SPARKED). Unfortunately, Sheryl was unable to attend the symposium.

3. Travelling Tales and Tunes: Partnering to Achieve Early Literacy Goals

-Lindsey Skeen, Airdrie Public Library

Travelling Tales and Tunes is an award winning partnership program between Airdrie Public Library, Community Links, and Rocky View Schools Adult Learning.

4. Community Partnerships: Building a Healthy Community Together

-Christine Mennear, Edmonton Public Library

The session highlighted the strategies and results of the partnership between Edmonton Public Library and Alberta Health Services.

Lightning Rounds:

1. Share a Story: Listen, Move, Play

-Karna Antoniw, Edmonton Public Library

Share a Story: Listen, Move, Play is a staff-mediated storytime incorporating digital components and activity stations. The activity stations are designed to support development areas as defined by ECMap.

2. Early Literacy Kits

-Jocie Wilson, Yellowhead Regional Library

YRL has created five kits based on early literacy programming best practices and experience for 0-5yr olds. The overall idea of these kits is that they are a great way for libraries with little staff for program prep or money for resources to delve into early literacy programming.

3. Read and Play Every Day: Summer Reading Games for Preschoolers in St. Albert

-Drew Thomas, St. Albert Public Library

St. Albert Public Library has hosted the Summer Reading Games from the past three years. Drew discussed the themes and how they appeal to a young audience and how the activities help the children progress and complete the game. In the summer of 2015, nearly 800 preschoolers registered to play the game.

4. Spruce Grove Public Library Plan of Service and the Needs of the Under 5 Population

-Gayle Sacuta, Spruce Grove Public Library

The City of Spruce Grove Library Board determined that creating young readers is a major service response in the library's plan of service for the next 3 years. Gayle discussed how they create young readers and promote a love of rhymes, stories, and songs.

5. Hosting a Sleepover for Stuffed Animals

-Charity Ambs, St. Albert Public Library

St. Albert Public Library has been hosting the Sleepover for Stuffedies for the past five years. Children bring a favorite stuffed animal or character into the library and leave them overnight. The next day when they come in to pick up their animal, they get to see what the Stuffedies did during their stay. This involves setting them up and taking photographs and it is usually a lot of fun. The pictures can then be turned into a handout, or posted online.

6. Festive Fridays

-Catherine MacDonald, Whitecourt Public Library

Whitecourt Public Library's Festive Fridays program focuses on music, singing, dancing, playing musical instruments and learning rhythm. Social interaction is also a component of Festive Fridays as well as the use of puppets and a storytime.

7. Rhyme and Rhythm

-Karen Tubb, Sundre Municipal Library

Research shows that the foundations of reading lie in rhyming, phonological awareness, and vocabulary development. The session took participants through a typical session, teaching some of the songs and rhymes used and the rationale for what they are used.



Group Discussion: Brainstorming Session

Based on some of the identified areas of importance from the 2015 survey on pre-k library services, PLSB engaged the symposium participants in group discussions. This is what we heard.

Group Discussion 1: Summer has been identified as a challenging time to provide programming. What strategies could you do, or do you do, to keep your pre-k programs going?

Big Ideas:

- **Change the format** of the program to fit summer. For example, take the program to the park, do more outreach, change the hours to accommodate a summer schedule, have a more passive approach (drop in at the parents' convenience)
- **Piggyback** on other programs. Incorporate pre-k programming into existing programs. For example, Summer Reading Club (SRC) for 0-5, learning centres set up during storytime for older siblings, incorporate into program for seniors, run SRC consecutively with pre-k program. Think broadly!
- **Partner, partner, partner.** Continue existing partnerships through the summer or create new partnerships with organisations that will be providing early childhood programs in the summer months.
- **Hire extra staff.** Hire a student, or give a high-school student some work experience.
- **Slow down.** Many libraries are ok with slowing down for the summer. Tip: plan programs for Tuesday-Thursday, as people often extend weekends for vacation in the summer.

Group Discussion 2: Partnerships

a) How do you define a partnership?

A partnership is a collaboration between two or more parties (each bringing something unique), working towards a common and agreed upon goal. The partnership must be reciprocal.

b) What makes a partnership successful?

A partnership is successful when each party benefits and is able to meet its organisational goal(s) and avoid duplication of effort.

c) How do you ensure that the partnership is beneficial to all parties?

- Communication. Make sure all parties involved are consulted.
- Partnerships need to be cared for: checking in, reviewing, planning, talking often, and feedback.
- Know your community. Ensure that the partnership will be of benefit to your community.
- Ask “what’s in it for me?” And then ask, “what’s in it for them?”

- Written agreements.

d) Think of every organisation in your community as a resource—who could you reach out to?

- **Community and health agencies:** FCSS, Parent Link, Alberta Health Services (AHS) health unit, rec centre, early intervention programs, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, Boys and Girls Club.
- **Municipality:** local festivals, events.
- **Education:** schools, preschools, daycares, high school, homeschool groups.
- **Think outside the box:** Adult education, farmers' market, disability bus, seniors' groups, RCMP, food bank, SPCA (pet therapy), St. Johns' Ambulance, hockey clubs, other libraries, Aboriginal groups, Rotary Clubs, dentist office, local businesses, art gallery.

Group Discussion 3: Setting aside any challenges that come to mind for a moment, what's the one thing you'd like to do at your library for early childhood literacy that you're not already doing?

Big Ideas:

- **Innovative programming:** sign language, animal programming, STEM-focused programs (science, technology, engineering, math), more active programs, programs specifically for one-year olds.
- **Staffing:** have a dedicated staff for children's services, have all staff trained so that everyone can run the programs.
- **Space:** have a dedicated space for children's programming, super-imagination experience lab, messy play space, new and inviting children's space, early literacy computer stations.
- **Engaging a wider audience:** fathers, seniors, intergenerational audience, children with special needs, reach vulnerable families.
- **More outreach:** get out into the community more. Have a presence at parks, seniors' homes, hospitals, shelters, food banks, doctors' offices, daycares.

Group Discussion 4: What is your biggest takeaway from today?

Big Ideas:

- **Validation of the work librarians do:** The importance/role of the library in providing early childhood services was highlighted throughout the symposium. There was opportunity for self-reflection and evaluation in program delivery, and a sense of renewed energy.
- **Excellent learning opportunity:** The symposium provided a chance to learn about: the significance of the early years, brain development, emergent literacy, ECMap, learning through play, using a holistic approach to development, the effects of early trauma, new programming ideas.

- **Networking:** The symposium was a chance to meet and get ideas from other librarians on partnerships, programs, etc.

Focus Group

On June 20, 2016, PLSB held a focus group meeting in Edmonton for a sub-section of LoL attendees. The purpose of the meeting was to follow up with participants from the February symposium. There were six participants from rural libraries and two Systems Consultants present (along with three PLSB staff). (These attendees self-selected to be part of this group at the February symposium).

The purpose of the focus group was to investigate any impact that may have come out of the two day event.

Impacts/Outcomes that came out of attending symposium for attendees:

- Networking and sharing ideas with others is one of the best professional development opportunities
- The ability to share and discuss ideas with other children's programmers
- Mid-sized library learned about ECMap results that hadn't been previously explained. A community coordinated event took place to understand results fully.

Impacts/Outcomes that came out of attending symposium for PLSB:

- Relationship forming with early childhood research agencies
- Broaden our network of resources and knowledge experts
- Holding symposia are useful to participants and PLSB staff -- we are able to provide a venue for professional development and networking that might otherwise not be available.

Program enhancements that have been considered and/or implemented by focus group participants since the symposium:

- Library System: Having a programmers' meeting -- This request came out of the symposium. It will have elements of sharing for all ages.
- Small rural library: New community Partnerships were created
- Library System: acquired Tumblebooks since February to support early childhood literacy based of the importance demonstrated at the symposium.
- Mid-sized library: Developed a recommended reading list which is being sent out with nurses and other community members.

What we learned was that enthusiasm and energy were generated by the event. We found out that new products, partnerships and ideas came out of the symposium. What we also heard was that there were a number of unanswered questions about keeping momentum with this initiative as well

as keeping the group engaged. PLSB will continue to build on what we've learned with this ongoing initiative.

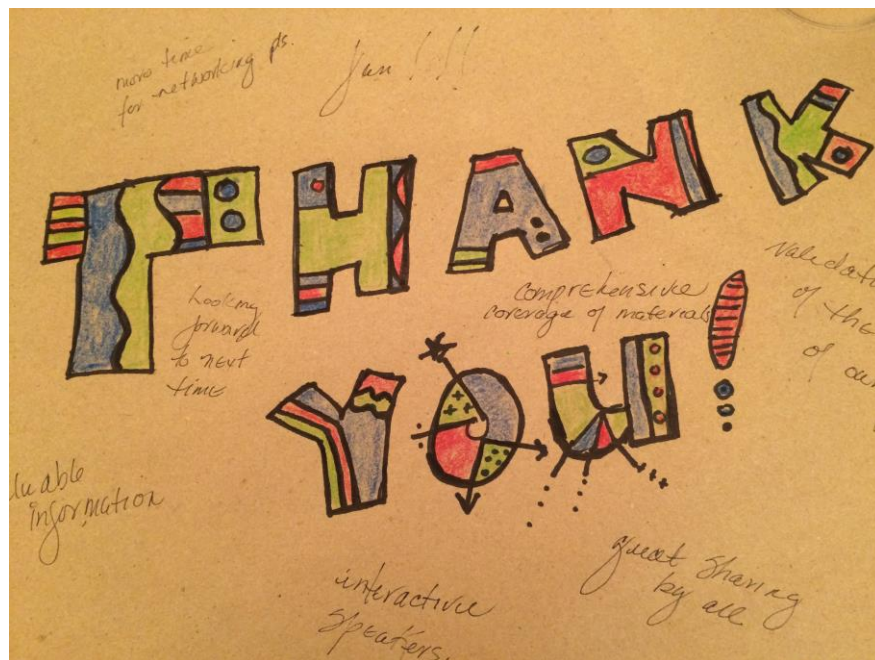
Conclusion

In the two-day “Little Ones in Libraries: Symposium on Early Childhood Library Services,” librarians from across Alberta learned about early childhood development and the significant role of the public library in fostering healthy children and communities. The long-term success of the symposium depends on how the libraries use the information and learning experience to shape future programs and services.

For more information about the “Little Ones in Libraries” symposium, and for available conference material, please visit the albertalibraries.ca website.

We would like to continue the discussion and hear more about what libraries in Alberta are doing. Please send Katrina Borowski any feedback, great ideas, and/or success stories:

katrina.borowski@gov.ab.ca



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