

LITERACY IN WINDSOR-ESSEX: LITERATURE SUMMARY

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ST. CLAIR COLLEGE RESEARCH COMMITTEE:
ADDRESSING CHILD LITERACY CONCERNS IN
WINDSOR-ESSEX COUNTY
THROUGH A PLACE- AND EQUITY-BASED CRADLE
TO CAREER APPROACH

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH PROSPERUS, UNLOCKING
POTENTIAL - CRADLE TO CAREER

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report outlines literacy challenges faced by vulnerable communities, based on existing and current literature. This literature summary will be used as a basis for analyzing existing gaps and assets locally. In turn, these findings will support researchers and stakeholders in developing research questions and literacy interventions that utilize a Place- and Equity-Based Cradle to Career Approach. The importance of emergent literacy is explored, with the use of the Early Development Instrument (EDI) and Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO). Current research highlights 4 risk factors to early literacy development.

Risk Factors Effecting Literacy Development:

- Household Income
- Health and Physical Development
- Literacy Environments
 - Home Literacy Environment
 - Schools and Childcare Centres
 - Neighbourhoods
- English as a Second Language (ESL)

WHAT IS LITERACY?

As outlined by the International Adult Literacy Survey, published by Statistics Canada, literacy is defined as the ability to use and understand text (print-based and digital) and thereby participate in society, achieve goals, and develop one's knowledge and potential (Clermont et al., 2005).

In order to measure literacy proficiency, a study on literacy by Statistics Canada was released, identifying five levels of reading skills among adult Canadians, with Level 3 being the "benchmark," which is considered the level required to fully participate in today's knowledge-based economy ("Building on our Competencies," 2003).

Literacy Levels, as outlined by Statistics Canada:

Level 1	0-225 points	This is the lowest level of literacy.
Level 2	226-275 points	
Level 3	276-325 points	This is the minimum level needed.
Level 4	326-375 points	
Level 5	376-500 points	This is the highest level of literacy

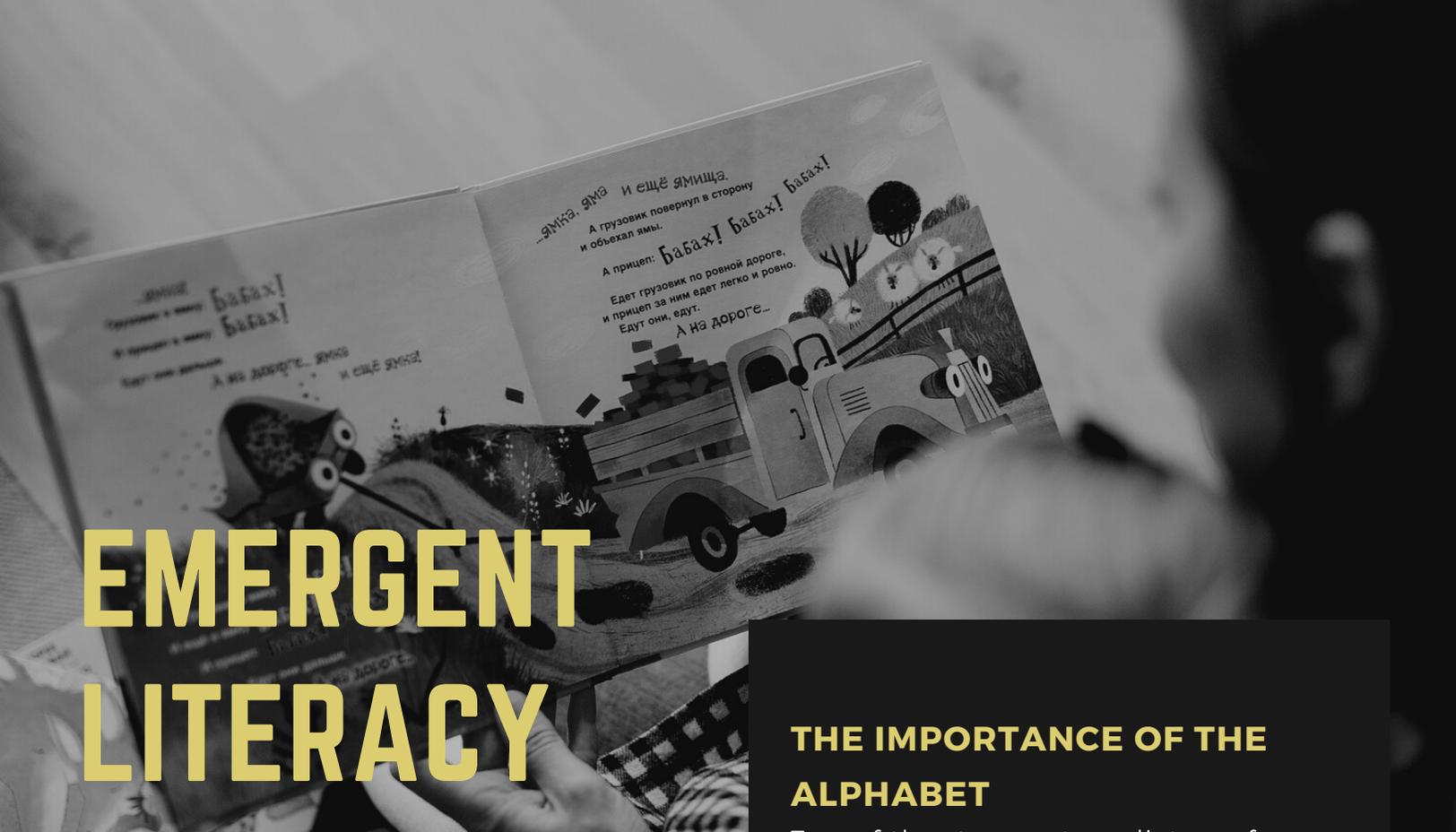


THE COST OF LOW LITERACY

Despite the importance of Level 3 literacy proficiencies, many Canadians struggle with literacy:

- 1 in 6 (or 15%) of Ontarians aged 16 to 65 score at, or below, Literacy Level 1 (Statistics Canada, 2013). At this level, individuals struggle with very serious literacy challenges, including literacy skills required to read basic texts.
- Those who score at a Literacy Level 2 account for 32% of Ontarians; these individuals can read, however, literacy skills necessary for employment and understanding medical instructions are significantly lacking.
- Overall, Literacy Levels 1 and 2 are associated with decreased participation in society; individuals who score at these levels are less likely to vote, volunteer, work, or engage in community programs.
- This is highly correlated to poverty, as “46% of adult Canadians at the lowest literacy levels (Levels 1 and 2) live in low-income households” (“More Than Words Can Say,” 2018).
- The literature notes that poor reading in the primary grades is one of the most common characteristics of students who withdraw from high school prior to completion (Denti & Guerin, 1999).





EMERGENT LITERACY

Emergent literacy or **early literacy**, consists of the skills, knowledge, behaviours, and attitudes that are developmental precursors to reading and writing, which begin at birth (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 2008).

Emergent literacy learners are making discoveries and engaging in literacy experiences when they:

- Explore literacy materials,
- Observe print within their environment,
- Interact with parents, guardians, siblings, or peers who role model how and why print is used (Teale & Sulzby, 1992).

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ALPHABET

Two of the strongest predictors of spelling and decoding, necessary for primary grades and beyond, are early alphabet knowledge and word decoding (Lonigan et al., 2008).

KNOWLEDGE OF PRINT

Basic knowledge of print (measured in preschool or kindergarten) predicts decoding, reading comprehension, and spelling in first or second grade (Lonigan et al., 2008).

LONG-TERM EFFECTS

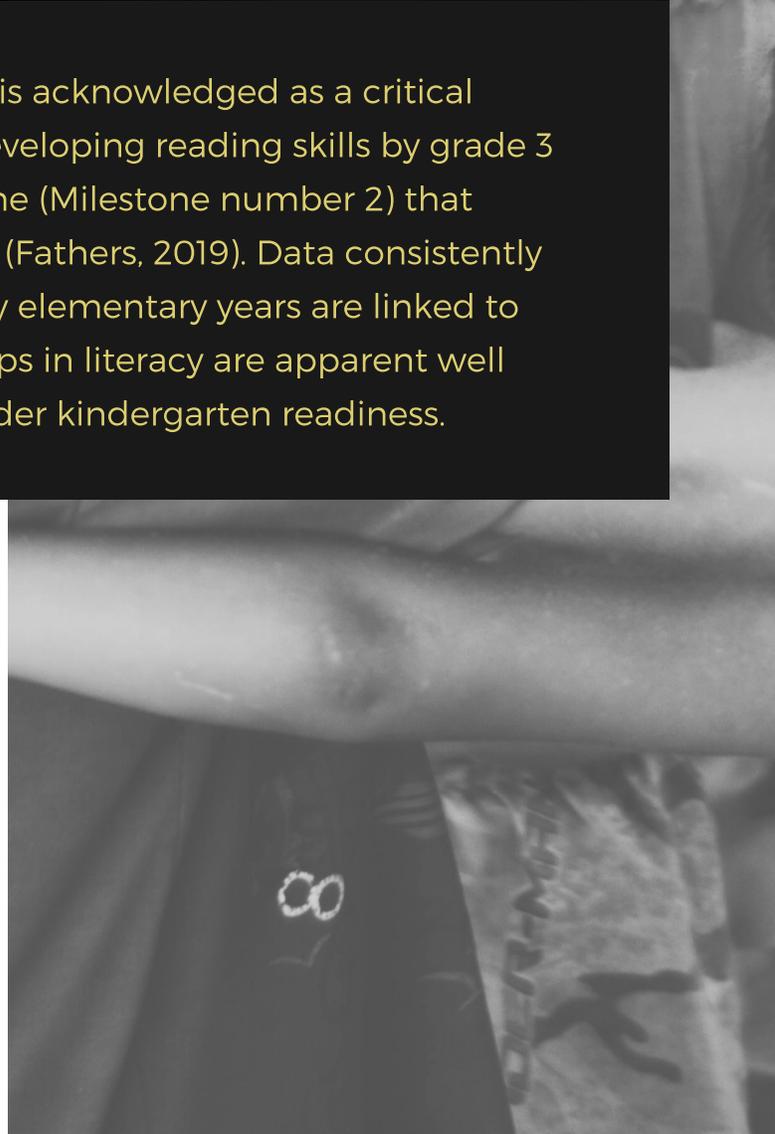
Evidence suggests that early literacy skills predict functional literacy skills in adulthood (Baydar et al., 1993).

LITERACY AND THE CRADLE TO CAREER FRAMEWORK



Across the [Cradle to Career continuum](#), literacy is acknowledged as a critical component to a child's academic success, as developing reading skills by grade 3 is a particularly crucial Cradle to Career milestone (Milestone number 2) that impacts future milestones throughout one's life (Fathers, 2019). Data consistently shows that disparities in literacy during the early elementary years are linked to persistent achievement gaps, and that these gaps in literacy are apparent well before formal schooling, which can thereby hinder kindergarten readiness.

- According to Reardon et al. (2013), on average, children from low-SES families enter high school with literacy skills five years behind their high-income counterparts.
- It is critical that steps be taken in order to support more children in developing literacy skills early, so they may be well-equipped to succeed in high school and beyond.



EARLY DEVELOPMENT INSTRUMENT (EDI)



As outlined in the [ProsperUS- Cradle to Career report](#), students who are proficient in reading by 3rd grade are more likely to graduate from high school.

In order to predict these trajectories and propose data-based interventions, in the year 2000, the **Early Development Instrument (EDI)** was designed by The Offord Centre for Child Studies (McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario) in Canada, which measures children's ability to meet age-appropriate developmental expectations at school entry, including those in the following five domains:

1. Physical Health & Well-being
2. Social Competence
3. Emotional Maturity
4. Language & Cognitive Development
5. Communications Skill & General Knowledge



("EDI in Ontario," n.d).

EDI FACTS:

Education Quality and
Accountability Office



- A research study, “Starting Early: Teaching, Learning and Assessment” was released in June 2013 and linked EDI results with Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) scores in Grade 3.
- It was found that “Students with low EDI scores in a particular domain—those in the vulnerable or at-risk groups—are much less likely to achieve the provincial standard on all components of the Grade 3 EQAO assessment than those who were deemed ready or very ready in kindergarten” (Calman & Crawford, 2013, p.13).
- Evidence suggests that such vulnerabilities at school entry are more prevalent in economically disadvantaged communities (Hertzman & Bertrand, 2007).
- Five cycles of EDI implementation have now been completed across Ontario.
- In Windsor-Essex, “the percentage of children considered at risk or vulnerable was lower than the province, with the exception of the Language & Cognitive Development domain” in all five cycles (“W.E Child Care and Early Years”, 2020).
- Windsor-Essex children are falling behind in their literacy development and are therefore at risk of a number of adverse outcomes associated with reading failure, such as academic and social issues, low self-esteem, and lacking motivation, particularly those in low-SES communities.

TARGET NEIGHBOURHOODS

The Neighbourhood Opportunity Index (NOI) was created by ProsperUs, in order to determine target neighbourhoods for the development of a Cradle to Career strategy and are therefore the areas of concentration for the research.

The ProsperUs Leadership Council decided to cluster neighbourhoods in order to target initial geographic areas with more in-depth services analysis and partnerships with the community, to determine the specific catchments moving forward. In doing so, these custom geographies meet logical geographic and community boundaries, but are unique in and of themselves.

- Neighbourhoods were evaluated across a number of indicators, including the percent of the population without post-secondary education, percent of population who do not speak a Canadian first language (English/French), as well as percent of population identifying as a visible minority to name a few.
- The results were calculated, and neighbourhoods were ranked and organized into the NOI. As a result of their findings, three target areas facing multiple, significant challenges were identified:



WEST WINDSOR

- Marlborough/St. James and Sandwich, as well as University/River West and Bridgeview, which largely make up Ward 2

DOWNTOWN WINDSOR

- Downtown/Glengarry and South Central which are located in Ward 3
- Midtown (Wyandotte to Giles) and Midtown, Mid-Walkerville which is located in Ward 4.

LEAMINGTON

- Leamington: Rural,
- Leamington: Urban N, and
- Leamington: Urban S





WHAT DOES THE LITERATURE SAY?



This review was created to identify common themes amongst existing literature conducted on early literacy and low-SES communities, which will support researchers in understanding underlying conditions faced by Windsor-Essex, Ontario target neighbourhoods West Windsor, Downtown Windsor, and Leamington.

The themes located in existing literature highlight the theoretical framework for the current research and may help identify risk-factors to the early literacy development of local children. From this review, recommendations for interventions and supports within these communities will be made as well as insights for further research. Windsor-Essex may face challenges associated with some or all of the risk factors explored in this review, and those unique to each neighbourhood will be disseminated in further research.

RISK FACTORS EFFECTING LITERACY DEVELOPMENT

1. HOUSEHOLD INCOME

- Kellett (2009) notes that there is a literacy achievement gap between children of low- and high- SES, which is often due to a lack of resources.
- Studies indicate that children from low-SES families have fewer books available at home and are read to less frequently than their high-SES counterparts (Froiland et al., 2013).
- Along with struggling to afford literacy supports, some children may also struggle with literacy if their parents do as well.
- It was noted that boys from low-SES households were the least likely to feel motivated to read (Kellett, 2009).

"18.2% of children who receive free school meals had less than 10 books in the home (Clark & Akerman, 2006). Further, "8% more children in receipt of free school meals reporting never or 'almost never' reading outside the school environment compared with their non-free school meals peers" (Kellett, 2009, p. 396).

For the purpose of this research study, socio-economic profiles will be developed for each target neighborhood, in order to understand existing demographics. Further, programs which aim to engage all genders, incorporate role modelling, share resources with families, and those that address the literacy needs of parents will be explored.

2. HEALTH AND PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT



- According to DeWalt et al. (2004), reading ability is related to knowledge about health and health care, hunger, hospitalization, global measures of health, and some chronic diseases; collectively termed **health literacy**.
- On average, people who read at lower levels are 1.5 to 3 times more likely to have adverse outcomes as people who read at higher levels, due to lacking health literacy (DeWalt et al., 2004).
- Illness can influence children's literacy learning, which may be exasperated by conditions of poverty.
- There are a number of conditions that can affect literacy development, including speech and language processing disorders, developmental disabilities, as well as Dyslexia and visual impairments.
- These statistics are supported by Denti and Guerin (1999) who add that the term "learning disability" has increasingly become an umbrella term for a vast number of diverse learning and behavior problems and that although early identification and diagnoses may benefit some students and help them build new literacy skills, it can also become a catchment that is both challenging and discouraging to escape.
- In a study conducted by Knight (2021), on self-perceptions experienced by children labelled dyslexic, results revealed that not only did students labeled dyslexic have lower expectations about their likelihood to pursue post-secondary education, but their parents and teachers had lower expectations of them as well. "Theories and research into teacher expectancy show that a teacher's expectations may shape the outcomes of the child...Furthermore, parent expectations have been shown to predict their children's educational outcomes" (Knight, 2021, p. 11)

Shifrer et al. (2011) indicate that there is a "disproportionate identification of learning disabilities among certain socio-demographic subgroups, typically groups who are already disadvantaged" (p. 1).

3. LITERACY ENVIRONMENTS



Psychologist, Urie Bronfenbrenner developed **Bioecological Systems theory**, which explains the “layers” that make up the environments children engage in, including their home, school, childcare centre, and neighbourhood; each of which has an effect on a child's development.

- All of these environments influence literacy development either directly or indirectly. This can occur through daily interactions, such as a child being read to at home or learning to write their name at school. While Bronfenbrenner's theory acknowledges the interactions within environments and the relationships children have within these systems directly, this theory also emphasizes relationships amongst and between these systems (Jaeger, 2016).
- For example, a local school may offer parent/child literacy programs; however, if a parent doesn't feel comfortable at the school, they may be less likely to engage in such a program.
- If a school program operates on weekdays during the evening hours, many low-SES children may not have the chance to participate, due to parents' work schedules.
- From these findings, it is important to the research that families within the Windsor-Essex target neighbourhoods have the opportunity to openly share their insights and perspectives on these topics.

Throughout the literature, 3 specific environments that influence literacy were noted: The Home Literacy Environment (HLE), schools and childcare centres, as well as neighbourhoods and the community programs that they offer.

3.1 THE HOME LITERACY ENVIRONMENT (HLE)

The Home Literacy Environment is comprised of experiences and opportunities to engage in literacy, provided and influenced most heavily by parents and caregivers.

Several studies including those by Burgess et al. (2002) and Wood (2002) have proven the significant correlation between early literacy experiences within the home and a child's literacy acquisition in the early years.



- Parent-child literacy activities can include: storybook reading, letter-based activities, singing and playing language games (Van Steensel, 2006).
- Parents may also role model different literacy skills, which is called incidental learning (Stainthorp & Hughes, 2000).
- Auerbach (2001) notes that children from low-SES HLE's and those who are ethnic minorities are considered to be 'literacy impoverished' (p. 385). However, this is a flawed view of the HLE and the role of the parent, as it approaches the issue of literacy and the HLE using a **deficit model**, thereby dismissing the literacy opportunities and experiences that these families do offer their children, which may be unique to their culture and outside the typical norms of their high-SES counterparts and those of the Western education system.
- This is important to recognize, as recommendations for future program planning should take into consideration the existing efforts of parents/caregivers and families, including efforts deemed less traditional to literacy learning, such as those occurring within families' cultural circles and places of worship.

3.2 SCHOOLS AND CHILDCARE CENTRES

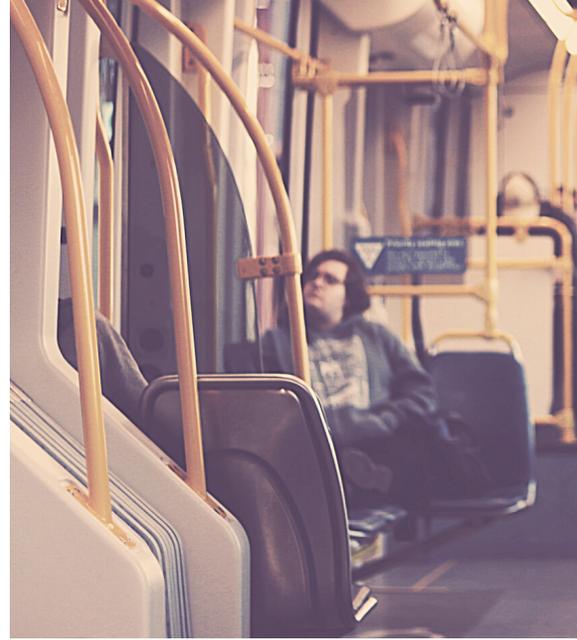


- Early childhood educational opportunities in preschool and childcare centres dramatically increases a child's literacy development; however, the literature notes that childcare is often unaffordable for many families.
- While subsidies in Ontario exist for those who qualify, limited spots have resulted in the rationing of funds and long wait lists.
- Socio-economic variables similarly influence the resources available to schools and childcare centres in much the same way as it does families.
- According to OECD (2011), schools located in low-SES neighborhoods face greater teacher absenteeism and fewer educational materials including textbooks and instructional equipment or technology, such as iPads and Smartboards.
- While there are 4 publicly funded school systems in Ontario, it is important to note discrepancies in funding that are generated through fundraising and parent counsels.
- According to the Ontario People for Education's 2017 report, 48% of elementary schools and 10% of secondary schools utilize fundraising efforts, in order to afford learning resources ("Competing Priorities," 2017).
- In addition to challenges arising from fundraising deficits amongst low-SES communities, schools located in rural areas face greater inequities as smaller, more remote schools have fewer resources and infrastructure to support ever-evolving educational needs.
- This is relevant to the research, due to large gaps in funding and essential resources for literacy that are thereby available to more affluent communities but not in others.

"Principals in higher SES schools report spending on 'extras', while principals in some lower SES schools report that they can't raise enough to support much-needed nutrition programs for students" ("Competing Priorities," 2017, p.34).

3.3 NEIGHBOURHOODS

In a recent study, investigators found a significant association between "low neighbourhood SES (characterized by higher rates of poverty, female head-of-household, and unemployment)" (Froiland et al., 2013) and children's literacy development. The literature pointed to the following challenges low-SES neighbourhoods may face:



TRANSPORTATION AND LOCATION:

- Availability and frequency of reliable transportation offered in the community is paramount.
- Durham (2006) notes that many low-SES families in rural communities often experience transportation issues that result in feelings of isolation and frustration when seeking to access necessary supports.

ACCESS TO PRINT:

- In a study of four neighbourhoods in Philadelphia, Neuman and Celano (2001) found that lower-SES neighbourhoods provided children with substantially less exposure to books and to neighbours reading books in public areas than did higher SES neighbourhoods (Froiland et al., 2013).
- The condition, maintenance, and availability of text resources that are readily available may also hinder many families, as neighbourhood resources often suffer from sparsities in current reading material for all age groups.
- Neuman and Moland (2016) identify these neighbourhoods as **book deserts**, which constrain young children's opportunities to engage with text outside of school.
- While many may argue that access to print is made readily available via the internet, many high-poverty neighborhoods face challenges with reliable internet access; a study by Rideout (2013) notes that "46% of low-income families with children below 8 had Internet access at home, in contrast to 86% of middle-income families. This becomes an even greater challenge for those living in rural areas.

4. ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL)

- For many children, learning English as a second language can pose several challenges to the learning process overall, especially in literacy.
- Results from the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT), indicate that English as a Second Language (ESL) and English Literacy Development (ELD) students have comparatively low success and high deferral rates (Cheng et al., 2007).

According to Rios and Castellón (2018), the English learning process for ESL students varies greatly, depending on factors such as: age, years of schooling, quality of the schools, teachers, curriculum, reading comprehension, access to books, and home literacy.

The “knowledge, skills, and abilities that immigrant children bring to school are in many cases overlooked or considered of no value by the teachers and school administration” and “the school environment and learning resources available exclude the culture and language of the child’s home” (Rios & Castillon, 2018, p. 87).

Due to the intersecting of these factors, it is evident that when ESL children come from low-income families, they are more likely to struggle than their high-SES counterparts.

In order to support these children and their families, it is important that research and information materials, such as surveys and flyers, be made available in the various languages reflected in the target neighborhoods.



ADDRESSING CHALLENGES: A COMMUNITY LITERACY APPROACH

Despite challenges faced within economically disadvantaged homes, schools, and neighbourhoods, many low-SES communities, including those in West Windsor, Downtown Windsor, and Leamington, do have established programs and initiatives operating out of schools, childcare centres, and community centres, sincerely dedicated to addressing existing literacy challenges faced by families, English language learners, and children with disabilities.

- A thematic challenge emerged however- many of these programs were working in isolation; fragmentation and system discoordination often hindered the overall impact of interventions.
- In the report “With Our Best Future in Mind: Implementing Early Learning in Ontario” by Pascal (2009), he notes that while many programs within schools and in the community are working to improve the coordination of services, they are “hampered by their own traditions,” which has led to redundancies in program planning and implementation.

“While we have some great programs with talented, dedicated people providing them, too often services are disconnected from each other. We leave it to families to bridge the gaps, avoid the overlaps, and negotiate their way, if they can. The current fragmented patchwork too often fails the best interests of our children, frustrates families and educators, and wastes resources” (Pascal, 2009, p. 4).

- To bridge these gaps, the literature emphasizes the need for system coordination and cohesion.
- In an analysis of five elementary schools in an underperforming school district, a system-wide literacy reform was launched, in order to strengthen ties amongst services and networks, which lead to significant improvements including increased confidence, goal setting, and shared allocation of resources (Daly et al., 2009).

COMMUNITY LITERACY

Community Literacy “builds on what has already been developed and identifies the contributions of various partners... It opens up the possibilities of what can be accomplished as community partners listen to each other and take action together to support literacy learning for people of all ages” (“Community Literacy,” p. 17).



PART OF THE PROSPERUS VISION IS “COLLECTIVE IMPACT” WHICH LEVERAGES LIKELY AND UNLIKELY PARTNERSHIPS TO CHANGE THE CONDITIONS IN OUR COMMUNITY.

As outlined in the [Cradle to Career framework](#) for Windsor-Essex, this is accomplished through designing a common agenda, data-driven decision making and shared measurement, alignments and mutually reinforcing activities and resources, continuous communications between partners and the community, and backbone support to coordinate and advance overall objectives (Frazier, 2019).

In order to formulate a literacy framework for the community, that embraces the Collective Impact vision, existing “Community Literacy” models will be explored and modified to meet the unique needs of West Windsor, Downtown Windsor, and Leamington neighborhoods.



NEXT STEPS

CONCLUSION

This literature review briefly explored some of the risk-factors many low-SES families and children face, developing literacy skills necessary to meet various academic milestones in line with their peers. While the themes outlined in this review are prevalent in the literature, it is important to note that factors uniquely effecting the target neighbourhoods being studied will be explored further. This literature review will be used to help guide the development of research tools, such as surveys and questionnaires, as well as the research questions as follows:

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What factors influence access to literacy resources in West Windsor, Downtown Windsor, and Leamington?
2. What literacy supports and community programs currently exist in these neighbourhoods?
3. What services exist from a parent perspective and how can this information be used to improve literacy services?
4. In what ways do services in Windsor and Essex County collaborate in service delivery to children and families?
5. In what ways, have other cities approached literacy gaps faced by disadvantaged neighbourhoods?
6. How can the best practices from other cities be modified and applied to meet the unique needs of West Windsor, Downtown Windsor, and Leamington?





NEXT STEPS FOR PARENTS

Some steps parents can take to improve literacy learning in children include:

- Read books together at bedtime.
- Speak to your children in both English and your first language.
- Engage in informal reading opportunities together (read street signs together, menus, or grocery store labels).
- Participate in community literacy programs.
- Visit your local library.
- Network with other parents in the community.
- Talk to your local school or childcare centre for more resources!

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