



# Literacy Training Needs of Early Learning Professionals

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the literacy training needs of Early Learning Professionals in Kingston and the Islands following a training needs analysis approach (McArdle, 1998). Early Learning Professionals were invited to complete a needs assessment questionnaire, and targeted workshops were subsequently organized to meet the training needs identified by the community of professionals who interact and work with groups of children up to the age of 6 years. We measured the effectiveness of two targeted training needs workshops through participant feedback and observations gathered at each session. Early Learning Professionals seek value in group-based learning in small to medium-sized groups, and opportunity to interact with new materials to integrate and inform their current practice, and referral to additional resources informed through evidence-based practice.

## INTRODUCTION

Early literacy instruction is important – it lays the foundation for lifelong literacy. According to the Early Reading Strategy (2003),

“The best time for children to start learning to read is when they are very young, usually at the preschool level. In the early years... children gain a definite advantage when they are given opportunities to engage in purposeful oral language and early print activities such as, observing others reading, enjoying and discussing a variety of books that are read aloud by others, experiencing and pretending to read predictable and familiar books, alphabet books, poems, rhymes and more, acting out stories, retelling familiar stories, and singing songs, sharing experiences with adults and talking about those experiences, observing print in the environment and connecting print with spoken words and their meaning, understanding book conventions and concepts about print, recognizing that words are made up of sounds, and manipulating those sounds through rhyming games, sound substitution games, alliteration, and building new vocabulary through books, experiences, and interactions.” (pp. 9-10)

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There is a substantial body of knowledge on literacy instruction that exists, but educators rarely have the chance to learn current best practices independently, perhaps due to limited time, opportunities, or knowledge of where to look. Therefore, it is essential that early educators are offered continuing professional education and support (Canadian Language and Literacy Network, 2003). Since effective classroom instruction is essential in fostering children's reading development, it is important that training opportunities be offered to early learning professionals. For the purposes of this research, early learning professionals will be defined as anyone working in early learning programs including, but not limited to: individuals working in licensed child care centres, private home day cares, early learning-kindergarten programs, parent support programs, children's recreational programs and those interested in supporting the literacy development of young children. Fortunately, members of this group are receptive to training when available (Frankel, 1994).

To support children's early literacy skills, the Canadian Language and Literacy Network (2009) proposed that effective reading instruction lessons should include the main components of reading development such as print awareness, decoding (letter knowledge, phonological awareness, phonetic awareness, and understanding alphabetic principle), vocabulary, reading comprehension and fluency. Literacy instruction needs to be explicitly taught to educators who work with children, starting from birth. Bredburg (2009) states, “Teachers must be taught how to teach reading to students.” Effective classroom instruction is essential in fostering children's reading development. The Canadian Language and Literacy Network suggested that although many children appear to be prepared to learn, they fail to acquire strong literacy skills alongside their peers. This is a reflection of the variable quality of instruction in different educational settings. Effective classroom instruction in the early grades is key to creating strong, competent readers and to preventing reading difficulties (Early Reading Expert Panel, 2003).

## PURPOSE

To conduct a training needs analysis and workshops to investigate the types of literacy training needed by early learning professionals in Kingston and the Islands. A training needs analysis often reveals the need for well-targeted training (McArdle, 1998). This project identified specific types of literacy training that Early Learning Professionals seek to improve the quality of children's learning experiences between birth and 6 years of age. Once the types of literacy training needs are determined, targeted workshops were offered to early learning professionals. The sessions were observed for engagement and effectiveness.

## Research Question

What are the literacy training needs of Early Learning Professionals (ELPs) in Kingston and the Islands and how might they be met effectively?

## METHOD

A Training Needs approach was used to gain an accurate picture of the Training Needs in the Kingston and Islands community. Qualitative and quantitative data was collected through questionnaires, observations and workshop feedback questionnaires from participants.

**Needs Assessment Questionnaire:** ELPs completed an online or paper-based version of the needs assessment questionnaire targeted to identify specific training they would benefit from which include topics such as phonological awareness, brain development, numeracy, early development instrument(s), fine motor development, letter knowledge, and narrative skills. All respondents were invited to provide their contact information to be contacted about future workshops.

**Workshop Observations and Feedback Questionnaires:** The data collected from the questionnaire was used to determine the two most commonly identified types of early literacy training needs. Workshops for each topic (Topic 1: Circle Time; Topic 2: Fine/Gross Motor and Writing Development) were offered twice (one weekday evening, and one early morning weekend) in the form of 1.5 hour workshops in April 2012 at Kingston Literacy & Skills.

## Participants

65 ELPs (Full-time n=50, Part-time n=9, Other n=6; Females n=63, Males n=2; Years of Experience ranged from <1 up to 45; teach English n=62, ESL n=2, Sign Language n=1) from Kingston and the Islands in Eastern Ontario participated in the Needs Assessment Questionnaire and results for topics are shown in Figure 1. ELPs reported working with multiple groups of children ranging from infancy to school-age (grade 1 and up).

Workshop participants included those who expressed an interest in participating in the workshops through the training needs survey as well as a mailing list sent out to ELPs in Kingston and the Islands (workshop participants ranged from groups n=8 to n=22).

The Research Assistant was present at each session to record quantitative and qualitative observations examining the engagement and interactions during the workshops. At the end of each workshop, participants were invited to complete a short questionnaire asking for feedback. Questions included structured and open-ended questions about content, knowledge and skills, behaviour, and confidence, as well as their overall impression about the effectiveness of the literacy needs training workshop in their early learning profession and took approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.

## FINDINGS

### Needs Assessment Questionnaire

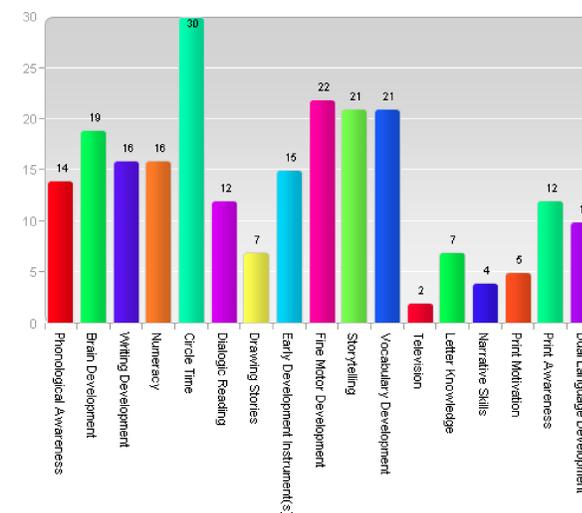


Figure 1. The number of ELP respondents identifying their top four literacy-related training needs topics to inform workshop topic selections.

### Workshops (Topic 1: Circle Time, Topic 2: Fine/Gross Motor and Writing Development) 1.5 Hours in Length

- Included a visual PowerPoint presentation by Early Learning Specialist Team at Kingston Literacy & Skills.
- Resources (both referred and within take-home packages) provided ELPs opportunities for planning, and to transform ideas for their learning environments, and draw specific examples from their experiences.
- Activities organized within the session promoted pair- and group engagement to support open dialogue and sharing of experiences.

## Workshop Observations

- Higher levels of engagement, participation, questions, and discussions held in smaller groups (approx. 8-12 participants) and during weekend morning sessions.
- Workshop participants sought specific tools, skills, and examples that could be used within their early learners environments.

## Workshop Feedback

- Participants described a productive, engaging, and informative experience, with strong interest in returning for future workshops
- Networking and organization of the workshop emerged as significant predictors of a positive learning experience and sharing of ideas and experiences.

## DISCUSSION

The initial needs assessment questionnaire, and feedback questionnaire revealed strengths, weaknesses, knowledge acquisition, and recommendations for future workshops/events held by Kingston Literacy & Skills. Professional development (PD) opportunities are highly sought after in ELPs who may have completed their training some time ago. Using a training needs analysis approach to meet ELPs training needs and availabilities was an effective way in meeting the needs identified by ELPs in Kingston and the Islands, and a method that should be used in other areas of development, beyond literacy. Future workshops may include longer sessions, sharing of ideas/ experiences, continued introduction of new material (i.e., ELECT), resources (e.g., manipulatives), and activities used in Early Learning. Future topics may include building and extending on the remaining literacy topics; as well as addressing other areas including mathematics development, and meeting literacy training needs for early second language speakers.

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