

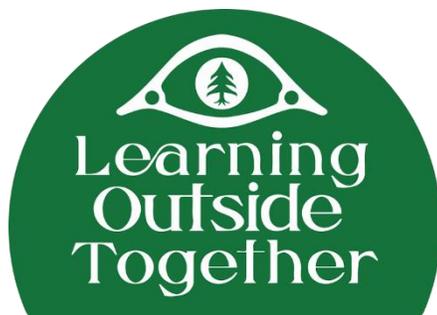


Learning Outside Together

Interim Report

October 2022

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Prepared for:



BC **Aboriginal**
Child Care Society



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INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

The early care and learning (ECL) sector plays a vital role in the well-being of children and families as well as in economic recovery from pandemic-induced labour market disruptions and other downturns. The pressing need for ECL providers to continue operating during the pandemic represented an emerging opportunity to expand innovative approaches to ECL that more fully embrace time outdoors. Research has shown that time outdoors both benefits children's growth and wellbeing and reduces the spread of COVID.

Currently in BC, childcare programs can only be licensed when they have an appropriate indoor space. Thus, those operating solely outdoors cannot be licensed and are not regulated. Technically this means anyone can open such a program, regardless of their ECL educational qualifications. There is thus a risk of licensed facilities and those who work in them being left behind in any movement towards taking early learning outdoors. The ECL sector's resilience also depends on recruiting and retaining a stable and skilled workforce. Providing meaningful professional development and supporting career advancement are among key tactics to make ECL careers more attractive as well as allowing workers to meet their certification requirements.

The Learning Outside Together (LOT) project is a joint partnership between the BC Aboriginal Child Care Society (BCACCS), the Early Childhood Educators of BC (ECEBC), and the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC). It is intended to incorporate traditional wisdom and promising practices to futureproof ECL primarily through the development and delivery of an outdoor learning education program for early childhood educators. The program consists of asynchronous online materials as well as synchronous weekly meetings with other educators, guided by a peer mentor. The program is available in a cohort model, with each cohort running for about three months at a time. The project is 80 per cent funded through Future Skills Canada, with the other 20 per cent funded through an anonymous donor.

This report presents implementation findings to date and early outcomes from cohort 1 – the pilot project. Since the project is still in progress, the early outcomes presented here must be interpreted as very preliminary. In addition, some evaluation questions asked of this cohort require a larger sample of participants and comparison with a control group to draw reliable conclusions. This will be addressed as the project moves to implement cohorts 2 and 3. The final evaluation report, planned for submission in March 2024, will present the substantive outcomes and impacts of the pilot and will answer the evaluation questions more completely.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Cohort 1 educators participated in the LOT program from March 2022 to June 2022. The program was delivered through online units on the BC Early Years Professional Development Hub. Over a period of three months, each participant completed ten asynchronous units, each focusing on a particular topic related to land-based experiences. The units contain a mixture of learning materials, including narrative interviews, written materials, and reflection exercises. Participants also received a physical welcome package, including a journal to write in and a seed to plant at the beginning of the program. Additionally, each participant was assigned a mentor within a small group of 6-8 participants. Participants in each small group shared the same mentor, with eight small groups overall. Mentors facilitated learning circles with their small group of LOT participants to further explore the course content and support one another in their learning journey. Contact with mentors and other LOT participants occurred virtually.

This project seeks to do the following:

- Increase ECL professionals' knowledge and skills related to land-based experiences, and thus improve the quality and duration of children's land-based experiences. This includes knowledge and skills related to the Indigenous practices and educational concepts of "Land as Teacher" as well as "outdoor play" pedagogy.
- Increase the formal mentorship education and mentoring opportunities for ECL professionals.
- Support participants, via the mentors, to work through any implementation barriers to increasing time spent outdoors. Barriers include licensing requirements, available physical space, and lack of supportive workplace policies.
- Generate evidence, through the project evaluation, that demonstrates the effectiveness of the project's approaches. This evidence would be used to inform, support, and sustain implementation of these approaches long after the initial funding period has ended.
- Embrace the principles of Two-Eyed Seeing – learnings from Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, alongside Western knowledge, and ways of learning to the benefit of all.
- Over time, create a self-sustaining program with regular cohorts of new participants and mentors.

EVALUATION SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

EVALUATION GOALS

The purpose of the evaluation is to tell the story of the LOT program, including who participated in it, who runs it, and the lives touched by it. It should tell the story of what changes occurred through the LOT program’s development and implementation (for the individual, sector and broader community); and demonstrate the benefits and value of the program. It was designed with the intent that its evidence could be used post-project to demonstrate the effectiveness of the LOT program approaches and ultimately to inform, support and sustain the implementation of future efforts to incorporate Land as Teacher and outdoor play into ECL.

Theory of Change

The theory of change for the LOT program was co-developed with the LOT Steering Committee. It is a conceptual representation of how the project activities will achieve its desired outcomes, describing the multiple factors that may influence the success of the project. The theory of change is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

At the individual and sector levels, the desired outcomes from the LOT program are built on the assumptions that there is sufficient ECL uptake and demand for the program, and that a sizeable learning community is formed over time. The program incorporates both Western and Indigenous worldviews and provides an opportunity for cross cultural learning and skill development. The learning and skills developed over the course of the program itself will be shared with other ECL professionals, the sector and broader community, resulting in – it is hoped – more funders and early childhood education centres investing in LOT, with subsequent adjustments to programming, regulations and licensing being made by decision makers.

At the broader community level, the desired outcomes take into consideration existing research showing a positive link between access to nature and child/youth development in several areas, including physical health, mental health, emotional well-being, resilience, and academic success (Dankiw et al., 2020).¹ Research has also linked exposure to nature in childhood with later

¹ Dankiw, K. A., Tsiros, M. D., Baldock, K. L., and Kumar, S. (2020). The impacts of unstructured nature play on health in early childhood development: A systematic review. *PLoS ONE* 15(2): e0229006. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0229006>

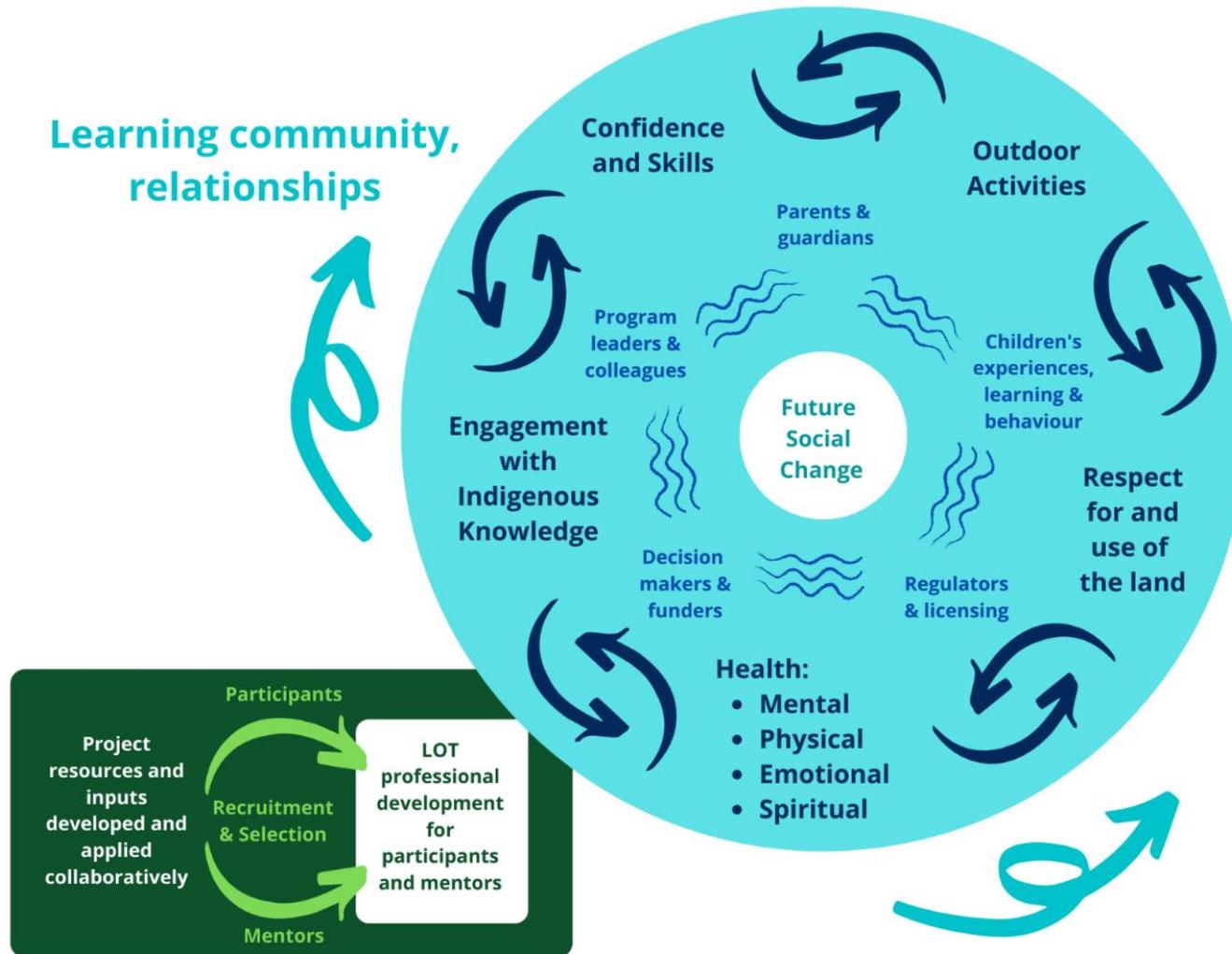
environmental leadership (Gifford & Chen, 2016;² Human Environments Analysis Laboratory, 2015).³ Ultimately, at the broader societal level, this project aims to contribute to the body of work recognizing the value of land-based programming, through the recognition of the interconnectedness of the outdoors, land, and culture with individual and community well-being (see Sangha & Russell-Smith, 2017).⁴

² Gifford, R., & Chen, A. (2016). *Children and nature: What we know and what we do not*. Prepared for the Lawson Foundation. Retrieved from <https://lawson.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Children-and-Nature-What-We-Know-and-What-We-Do-Not.pdf>

³ Human Environments Analysis Library. (2015). *Children & nature: A systematic review*. Prepared by the Human Environments Analysis Library (HEAL) of Western University on behalf of The Lawson Foundation. Retrieved from https://lawson.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/YE_Systematic_Review_HEAL.pdf

⁴ Sangha, K. K., & Russell-Smith, J. (2017). Towards and Indigenous ecosystem services valuation framework: A North Australian example. *Conservation and Society*, 15(3), 255-269.

Figure 1



Evaluation questions

The evaluation seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is being implemented? How is it being implemented?
2. Are participants and mentors reached as intended?
3. What has been done in an innovative way?
4. How well did the program work?
5. Did the program produce or contribute to the intended outcomes in the immediate and short term? For each outcome:
 - a. For whom, in what ways, and in what circumstances?
 - b. What were the unintended outcomes (positive and negative), if any?
 - c. To what extent can changes be attributed to the program?
6. What particular features of the program and context made a difference?
7. To what extent is the LOT program self-sustaining?

EVALUATION DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The evaluation of the experiences of participants from cohort 1 of the LOT program has a pre-post design. The implementation findings from cohort 1 are being used to refine the approach to cohorts 2 & 3, as well as to test the program parameters and evaluation tools.

The LOT program impact evaluation will be a pre-post randomised waitlist control design. Eligible applicants are randomly selected to participate in either cohort 2 or cohort 3. Both cohorts will participate in the LOT program, however Cohort 2 begins the LOT program in September 2022, whereas cohort 3 will start the program in February 2023. Both cohorts are invited to complete a series of three surveys (baseline, end of program and approximately three months after the program ends) during the same time period (September 2022, December 2022, and February 2023). Results from the intervention group (cohort 2) will be compared to the control group (cohort 3) in order to determine the early effects of the LOT program.

Data sources

This is a mixed methods evaluation utilizing data from both quantitative (numerical or measurable) and qualitative (subjective, personal reflections) sources. Triangulation of the results will be used to provide a comprehensive assessment of the LOT program. The multiple data sources that are being used to inform the evaluation of the LOT program, as well as the type of data collection, are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1 **Data sources for the evaluation**

Participant level		Quant.	Qual.
Application form and baseline survey	<p>All applicants that applied for the program filled out an application form. A baseline survey was also sent to accepted applicants when they began participating in the pilot. The application form and survey collected information from consenting participants about their demographics, education and employment status, and skills and knowledge related to the course content.</p> <p>For this report, there were 61 completed application forms and 59 completed baseline surveys from cohort 1 participants.</p>	✓	
Interim and follow-up surveys	<p>LOT participants were invited to participate in three additional surveys – one interim survey, one end of program survey, and a three-month post program follow-up. The interim survey consisted of 4 questions related to participant experience with the course to date, whereas the follow-up surveys repeated most of the topics from the baseline survey.</p> <p>This report includes the results of the 39 interim surveys and 37 end of program surveys. The three-month post program survey was still in progress at the time of writing this report, and hence is not included in this report.</p>	✓	
Focus group	<p>Conducted with participants who had completed the LOT program to obtain more in-depth information about the participants' experience with the course, challenges, successes, and early outcomes. Participants received a \$100 gift card for their participation in this activity.</p> <p>Written informed consent protocols were shared with participants in advance, and verbal consent was obtained at the beginning of the focus group. Participants understood that the activity was voluntary and their identities would be kept private. All participants agreed that anonymous quotes from the focus group could be shared publicly for knowledge translation and promotional purposes.</p> <p>Eight participants took part in a two-hour focus group at the end of the program.</p>		✓

Participant level		Quant.	Qual.
Photovoice workshops	<p>Two workshops were conducted with a small group of participants who had completed the LOT program. The first workshop introduced participants to the photovoice method and provided tips and advice for creating narratives and taking photos in response to guiding questions about the LOT program. Two weeks later, participants met to share their photos and stories, and discuss each others' perspectives. Subsequent themes emerging from the discussion, as well as illustrative narratives and photos are included in this report. Participants received a \$100 gift card for their participation in this activity.</p> <p>Written informed consent protocols were shared with participants in advance, and verbal consent was obtained at the beginning of each photovoice session. Participants understood that the activity was voluntary and their identities would be kept private. All participants agreed that anonymous quotes, narratives, and images from the photovoice activity could be shared publicly for knowledge translation and promotional purposes. For images including adults, photo release forms were obtained. For privacy reasons, participants did not to take photographs of children.</p> <p>Four participants took part in the photovoice workshops.</p>		✓
Partners and Steering Committee Level		Quant.	Qual.
Partner meetings	These regular meetings provided opportunities for SRDC, ECEBC, BCACCS, as well as LOT and mentorship program creators to discuss any issues and plan for activities related to program creation, recruitment, implementation, and data collection.		✓
Steering Committee meetings	These regular meetings provided opportunities for LOT partners to obtain feedback and guidance for different aspects of the LOT program. The steering committee comprised Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, Elders, and childcare professionals who guided the project and supported decision-making. This committee played a crucial role in ensuring traditional knowledge and experience were incorporated into the project.		✓
Mentor feedback	Mentors are a core component of the LOT program. The partners (including the evaluation team) received updates on the implementation and lessons learned from the mentorship program throughout the duration of cohort 1.		✓

IMPLEMENTATION

PARTICIPANT PROFILE

At the beginning of the program, there were 61 participants in cohort 1. Most identified as female (there was one non-binary individual and three who identified as male) and fell in the age range of 30-65. By design, a substantive share (44 per cent, n=27) of participants who started the program identified as Indigenous. Also, by design, participants came from across the province, as well as from urban, rural, and remote settings.

Most participants were well experienced working with children, though few were ‘very experienced’ in the outdoors. Nearly all worked in group care settings and 17 per cent (n=10) were self-employed.

More than 60 per cent of participants were caregivers to their own child/ren, and 20 per cent cared for an adult in their household. None of the participants identified as Francophone, and one third identified as racialized. Fourteen per cent of participants (n=8) identified as having a disability. A full description of participant and workplace demographics appears in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2 Participant demographics for those enrolled in cohort 1

Individual characteristics	Number	Percentage
Identity		
Female	55	93%
Male	3	5%
Non-binary	1	2%
Age range		
15 – 29	7	11%
30 – 44	30	49%
45 – 65	22	36%
66+	2	3%
Indigenous (First Nations, Metis, or Inuit)	27	44%

Individual characteristics	Number	Percentage
Years of experience working with children		
Less than 1 year	4	7%
1 – 4 years	12	20%
5 – 9 years	11	18%
10+ years	34	56%
Outdoor experience		
Beginner (almost no time spent outdoors)	2	3%
Not very experienced (little time spent outdoors)	15	25%
Somewhat experienced (lots of time spent outdoors)	41	67%
Very experienced (outdoor profession/expert skills)	3	5%
Caregiver of child 18 or under	36	61%
Caregiver of adult over the age of 18	12	20%
Self-employed	10	17%
Racialized	19	32%
Experience disability	8	14%
Francophone	0	0

Source: LOT cohort 1 application form and baseline survey; some missing information due to incomplete baseline surveys.

Table 3 Workplace demographics for those enrolled in cohort 1

Workplace characteristics	Number	Percentage
Region (Health Authority)		
Fraser Health	14	23%
Interior Health	10	16%
Northern Health	9	15%
Vancouver Coastal Health	14	23%
Vancouver Island Health	14	23%

Workplace characteristics	Number	Percentage
Workplace setting		
Urban (e.g., in a city)	39	64%
Rural (e.g., adjacent to or outside a city)	18	30%
Remote (e.g., considerably distant from a city)	4	7%
Workplace type		
Group care	58	95%
Family care	2	3%
Outdoor childcare	1	2%

Source: LOT cohort 1 application form.

DESIGN AND DELIVERY

What was implemented?

The LOT program partners met regularly to develop, guide, and troubleshoot the implementation of the multiple components of this program. These included:

- The LOT curriculum. This online professional development course is delivered via the BC Early Years Hub. It consists of modules reflecting the differences and overlap between outdoor play and Land as Teacher, the role of the educator, building skills to support expanding ECL provision outdoors and increasing activities that connect children to BC’s natural environment.
- Supporting materials for the LOT program. Communication materials were developed to raise awareness about the LOT pilot. These included a short promotional video, posters, and Frequently Asked Questions posted on the ECEBC website. A welcome package of materials was also assembled for each successful applicant to welcome them to the program. The package contained a welcoming letter, weather resistant notebook, a seed, and other “swag”.
- The LOT Steering Committee. A steering committee of Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, Elders, and childcare professionals was formed to guide the project and support decision-making. This committee played a crucial role in ensuring traditional knowledge and experience were incorporated into the project.

- LOT program mentors. The online mentorship program was originally envisioned to be developed and hosted on the BC Early Years Hub. As this was not ready in time for cohort 1, seven experienced mentors⁵ who were already involved in the development of the LOT program mentored the eight small participant groups (one of the mentors worked with two small groups). The mentorship program was delivered as a series of webinars for cohort 2 mentors prior to the start of their cohort and is anticipated to be delivered via the BC Early Years Hub for cohort 3 mentors (who will be recruited in December 2022).
- The LOT program evaluation. Evaluation is a fundamental component of the LOT project and was integrated into the program from the beginning. The evaluation impacted eligibility and selection criteria and strongly benefited from regular input from program partners to ensure methods and outcomes were culturally respectful and meaningful to participants.

Were participants and mentors reached as intended?

For cohort 1, the initial target was to have 39 participants, supported by 13 mentors (three participants per small group). However, the response to recruitment far exceeded expectations with 946 applications submitted for the 39 spots. Due to this overwhelming response, the number of available spots was increased to 64.

Despite having fewer mentors than originally planned (seven instead of thirteen), the first group of mentors was able to support the higher number of participants, given their level of prior mentoring experience. Cohort 1 were divided into eight groups of 6-8 participants each.

IMPLEMENTATION FINDINGS

This section explores what worked well, the challenges that were faced and how were they addressed, as well as the lessons learned.

What worked well

The **project administration infrastructure** was an important vehicle for the implementation of the project. The project partners, as well as the LOT program and mentorship program creators met regularly, originally on a weekly basis to support course development, identify potential issues and collaboratively troubleshoot issues as they came up.

⁵ The seven mentors were already experienced in outdoor play or Land as Teacher. They included the LOT program creator, staff from ECEBC and BCACCS, and members of the LOT Steering Committee.

The end of program survey data (n = 37) suggests that **LOT largely covered the topics it intended** to cover. Across 11 content areas, there was more than 90% agreement that each topic was covered.

Recruitment of cohort 1 graduates to become cohort 2 & 3 mentors also worked well. Seventeen cohort 1 participants applied to take the virtual mentor training in readiness to become mentors for cohorts 2 & 3.

The theory of change and data collection instruments have also worked well to date. While cohort 1 is not part of the impact evaluation, there are preliminary findings pointing to change in most of the dimensions presented in the theory of change. The data collection instruments have also been quite sensitive to date.

Challenges

Full integration of Indigenous and Western concepts in the evaluation framework and the mentorship program. The Steering Committee did not endorse the original draft evaluation framework. In order to ensure that the framework demonstrated both Indigenous and non-Indigenous views and the principles of Two-Eyed Seeing, the partners paused the project to allow for a series of workshops to be hosted by the partners about different components of the project. The purpose of the workshops was to engage the Steering Committee more fully into the project and allow time for collaborative input and co-development of different components, such as the program eligibility, evaluation questions, and the theory of change. In addition, two Indigenous mentors joined the development phase of the mentorship program to ensure that Indigenous teachings were incorporated throughout the program.

Small group formation and scheduling the small group meetings. Initially the project partners intended to form small groups according to communication style preference so that no one would have to learn or download new technology to connect with their groups. This information was collected in the application form but became too difficult to use with the large number of options and large group sizes. Instead, the project partners decided to create groups according to two criteria: having Indigenous participants evenly distributed throughout the groups to ensure each group had Indigenous representation and grouping according to urban/rural/remote workplace settings.

Unfortunately, this new design also proved challenging for a variety of reasons. First, Indigenous participants were not evenly distributed across workplace settings, meaning there were not enough Indigenous educators in urban settings to support having 3-4 Indigenous participants per group. A larger issue arose from the process of filling from the waitlist, since groups were formed from the initial list of applicants invited to join cohort 1. As potential participants declined to join the program, their spot was filled from the waitlist according to the original

stratification criteria, which included Indigenous distinction and health authority but did not include workplace setting (urban/rural/remote). As a result, the final groups were mixed across workplace settings. This proved to be a learning opportunity. Mentors felt that this additional element of diversity in the groups provided for richer conversations and ultimately did not pose a challenge.

With the shift to larger groups came the somewhat unanticipated difficulty of scheduling regular group meetings. Initially, this was not expected to be an issue with groups of only four people; however, finding a time for all eight or nine (including the mentor) members to meet every week proved challenging for some groups. Additionally, given the desire to fill all the spots available, people were being added from the waitlist up until the first week of the program, making it hard for them to adjust their schedule on such short notice.

As a result, the process for small group formation was adjusted for cohort 2. Moving forward, groups will be formed based on availability and Indigenous distinction only. Further, the need to ensure cultural safety was prioritized over having Indigenous representation in each group, meaning some groups did not have any Indigenous participants in order to ensure that Indigenous educators would not risk being the only Indigenous member in a group. Additionally, small groups will now only be formed after the entire cohort has been filled (i.e., no substitutions from the waitlist after the groups have been formed), so this new design provides more control over final group composition.

Another challenge encountered by the project partners was **transparent and equitable application of the eligibility criteria in a way that upheld the principles of the LOT program**. This was most pronounced when deciding what types of workplaces and educators could participate. The LOT project strived to be inclusive and to hold spaces specifically for Indigenous educators. Those working directly with children were also prioritized for cohort 1 and the decision was made to only accept ECEs rather than all ECL professionals. This was to ensure that the LOT program could be put directly into action with those who had immediate experience working with children and not those still studying for their certification.

However, as noted in the first round of applications, Indigenous educators were overrepresented among those with non-traditional ECL positions who were not automatically going to be considered eligible for the program. The project partners discovered that some eligibility criteria were at odds with others, namely working as an ECE in a licensed childcare centre and having a program that welcomes and holds spaces for Indigenous educators.

There were also some **participant level challenges with using the Early Years Hub**. These included having difficulty navigating the Hub and trying to post reflections, which did not show up on their screens. To help with these types of issues, cohorts 2 & 3 will participate in large group orientation sessions prior to starting their respective programs. These orientation sessions

will include a review of the Hub. In addition, cohort 2 and 3 mentors will be past LOT graduates, and hence will have firsthand experience using the Hub. This puts them in a good position to support their small groups with technical assistance.

Implementation lessons learned

As noted earlier, the initial participant recruitment indicated a **high demand in the ECL community for Outdoor Play/Land as Teacher** professional development. Project partners were contacted by local ECL professionals, those who work in settings adjacent to early childcare (such as K-12 teachers, college instructors, and licensing officers), and even individuals from outside of BC and Canada, who were interested in taking the LOT program. Nonetheless, by the second intake, we were unable to recruit the desired proportion of Indigenous educators to the program. The recruitment experiences to date suggest that expanding LOT eligibility to welcome ECL professionals broadly, as opposed to ECEs specifically, may be necessary to support the sustainability of the program and meet our aspirational goals.

Several changes were made to the application process for later cohorts to ensure that **program eligibility and time commitments were made clearer**. The types of eligible workplaces as well as the activities and expected time commitment to complete the course are now stated up front in the online application form.

As noted in the challenges section, the initial experience with **small group meeting scheduling** led to a change for cohorts 2 & 3. Mentors will now be first asked for their availability, in order to determine available days and times for small group meetings. Participants who accept spots will then be surveyed for their availability for small group meetings and assigned into mentor groups that match their availability.

Another lesson learned is to **provide more lead time to participants to prepare for the course**. Cohort 3 was filled faster than cohort 2, after only two rounds of outreach from the waitlist. There were more declines for cohort 2 because of scheduling issues, though still dramatically lower than declines for cohort 1 which happened on an even more condensed timeline. This finding was in line with the cohort 1 qualitative data collection as well – with enough time to plan, participants were willing to make LOT a priority and schedule around it.

An early and enduring lesson was to **plan enough time from the outset to engage in decolonizing practices to ensure meaningful partnerships that enrich the project**. Engaging the wisdom of Indigenous worldviews along with westernized views was a thoughtful process. The partners deliberately paused the implementation of the course in order to do the work of fully engaging with Indigenous partners in the co-development of a meaningful program and supporting tools.

The cohort 1 pilot test of the survey instruments led to the elimination of questions that resulted in high nonresponse rates, as well as the elimination of questions where participants already scored highly, on which it was thus not possible to measure any change. This resulted in **shorter survey instruments** for cohorts 2 & 3. Finally, **in order to increase the response rate to the survey overall, an individual survey incentive system has been introduced for cohorts 2 & 3** to encourage participation in the evaluation.

Improvements suggested by participants

In terms of content, there was a recurring theme in both sets of qualitative data collection to **hear more from licensing officers**. This included incorporating more licensing officers in the online modules, as well as to invite licensing officers to question and answer sessions in the small group discussions. Another recommendation was to **incorporate feedback from the reflection questions into the modules** so that this feedback could be readily assessed again, rather than leaving it solely for the small group discussions.

In terms of the format, several people recommended an **in-person version**, which could be based on the current course, or as a “LOT version 2.0”. As one participant put it –

“I think that the only way for me personally that this program could get any better was if you did it in person. The drawback of that is obviously, you don't get to hear the input from people all over B.C., which I really did enjoy myself as well. But yeah, if I had a wish list that would be at the top of the list” – LOT participant

Multiple participants also suggested a **hard copy version** of the course – both for their own personal comfort, as well as to make the content easily shareable with colleagues. Other improvements suggested by participants included the **incorporation of a checklist to ensure participants were “doing enough”, incorporating reflection prompts into the notebook, and having two weeks to spend on the longer modules**. A few participants suggested having more organized or efficient small group meetings.

What was done in an innovative way?

The LOT program was innovative in that it was designed to incorporate two aspects relatively new to the ECL space. The first is **the combination of the two worldviews – Indigenous and non-Indigenous into the LOT program itself, as well as the project administration and infrastructure supporting the program**. This was done in a very deliberate and thoughtful

way, and in that sense, the approach to this project became as important a source of learning as the LOT program itself. For the partners, the experience of learning how to implement Two-Eyed Seeing successfully could become as much of a legacy from the project as the LOT program itself.

The second is **the combination of the online format with the additional support of the small group mentorship and self-perpetuating mentor recruitment**, which is an innovative model for this type of program. While developed initially as a response to the pandemic and the Future Skills Centre’s call to “future proof” skills development, the project created a model that could prove transferable to other learning or training applications. Participants do not have to pay to participate and learn skills in a supportive online environment, but they commit as they “graduate” to mentor the next generation of participants. This creates a powerful ongoing learning community that is self-sustaining at a potentially low cost.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

HOW WELL DID THE PROGRAM WORK?

This evaluation question is meant to examine whether the LOT program produced or contributed to the intended outcomes in the immediate and short term. For each of these outcomes, wherever possible, the data should indicate for whom, in what ways, and in what circumstances these outcomes were achieved. However, it is not yet possible to address the question for whom the LOT program produced the intended outcomes. The answers require the larger sample and follow-up data from later stages of the project. In the meantime, the first cohort revealed some immediate pre-post differences and thus findings that must be regarded as preliminary.

Completion rates

Overall, there was a 74 per cent completion rate for the program, meaning 45 of the original 61 participants completed at least 24 of the required 30 hours. Only six of those originally enrolled in the program did not complete any hours. Although the sample sizes were small, completion rate data suggests that the LOT program can do more to appeal to and support a diverse demographic of educators in completing the program.

Only 37 participants responded to the survey at the end of the program, making results difficult to interpret. Furthermore, the changes observed might have arisen anyway over the three months of the program. So, it is difficult to attribute changes to the program in the absence of a comparison group. Given that cohort 1 was meant to test systems and provide only preliminary data, this analysis focuses on themes rather than detailing results from the surveys.

Changes to practice

In general, educators made concrete improvements in their programs and pedagogy from the start of the program to the end of the program. Participants tended to report more time outdoors with children, more improvements to their outdoor spaces, and more confidence taking children outdoors at the end of the program than they did at the beginning of the program. Participants in the qualitative data collection were able to provide more details about changes in their practice due to participating in the LOT program. One of the photovoice participants shared the following narrative and photos to illustrate their change in practice:

Growth of Cow Parsnip

“We learned that Cow parsnip can be a harmful plant if you touch it at certain stages of its growth. Through plant identification, and as the plant grew, I learned that it was Cow parsnip and we went through the process of teaching



this to the children not to touch the plant and that it's important that before we touch any plants, we know what they are and if they are safe to touch. My confidence after taking the LOT program has grown in wanting to identify things and wanting to know if they have a purpose such as traditional medicine, food, or rub”.

Although practices related to being outdoors with children improved, ratings of interactions with other adults, such as colleagues, families, and licensing officers, only modestly improved or, sometimes, declined from program start to end. While this supports the idea of the LOT program resulting in real-world changes, it highlights that these changes can sometimes cause friction in interpersonal relationships, especially in the short-term.

Indigenous engagement

Overall, participants reported deeper engagement with Indigenous knowledge at the end of the program compared to the beginning. In many cases, the ratings were quite low to begin with and sometimes still relatively low in the end-of-program survey despite a modest increase from pre- to post-program. While the sample size does not support examining potential differences in

Indigenous engagement specifically for participants who identify as Indigenous, the qualitative data collection provided some insights at a personal level.

As one participant described it:

“This has been a way for me to learn how to be more of an ally and help people to understand what it means to have cultural safety and promote ways of being that are outside of your own comfort zone. And again, to be authentic about that and not just take that for granted and ask permission and then move with the children through that respectfully. It's a big process.” – LOT participant

Multiple Indigenous participants reported participating in the LOT program in order to connect or reconnect with Indigenous teachings and wisdom about the land, and to pass this on to the upcoming generation.

“I was really looking to find a way to authentically bring more Indigenous knowledge into the programs and sort of connect more with my children's heritage, my background and bring that into their educational lives and have them represented in their own classrooms. So, I found this was a really positive way for me to gain some more knowledge and tools to do that.” – LOT participant

The incorporation of Indigenous teaching for the benefit of future generations was also echoed by some of the non-Indigenous participants, as illustrated in the example below.

I think she's thirsty!



“This tree went from being a tree that was off limits (by my co-worker) to a tree that the kids take care of and have learned to love. Before they were “allowed” to touch it, they would sneak up to it and hang off the branches and try and break the branch off...but now they hug, water and nurture it.

I like to think my evolving understanding of the Land as Teacher helped with that. Instead of always telling the children to stop touching the tree or move away (with no reason), I talked to them about the tree – what the tree does for us (gives us shade, helps us live, gives shelter to birds and squirrels etc.) and what would happen if we talked and listened to the tree. The change didn't happen

overnight (still working on my co-woker!), but gradually the children started to gently touch the tree, ask (the tree) if they could hug it and then they started watering it. One day a few of them noticed that a squirrel was in the tree and the excitement was out of this world!”

Skills assessment

Participants experienced increases across a variety of skill types and levels, suggesting LOT was a good introductory course that accommodated a range of starting points. Across skills related to being outdoors with children, the most common response shifted from ‘Good’ to ‘Excellent’ from program start to end. Increases across skill types and levels were also findings in the qualitative data collection, as demonstrated in the quotes below.

“It tested me outdoors – showed me different ways to relate to nature and remind me why I love the outdoors for myself and the children.” –
LOT participant

“I’ve always been really comfortable with the outdoors and the learning part of it. But I think for me, I want to further it to advocate for the program and what it can do with children, for educators.” –
LOT participant

Spring Time “Forest Teachers”



“(This picture) shows that even the educators can have fun along with the children. Taking the LOT program this year allowed me to bring back all the information to my co-workers and then work with them to bring it into the outdoor programming with our children. We had team discussions on safety rules and comfort levels while leaving our fenced area and spend many discussions on activities to do with the group and ways the children could explore on their own with the educators fostering this learning. No matter where your comfort level with being out on the land, you will get something out of the LOT course and the experience”.

Health and wellbeing

While the program was associated with some health improvements (on dimensions such as feelings of balance), the short-term benefits did not extend far beyond outdoor education. There were both positive and negative changes related to job satisfaction, suggesting that LOT is not a universal solution for ECE burnout.

These types of immediate and local changes are consistent with the timeframe of the data and may change in the follow-up survey results.

WHAT WERE THE UNINTENDED OUTCOMES (POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE), IF ANY?

While there have been several lessons (as mentioned earlier), we cannot report on unintended outcomes, as outcomes cannot be fully assessed until after the implementation of cohort 2. That said, there have been interesting assessments provided by individuals during the qualitative data collection. For example:

Every flower must grow through dirt



“This photo perfectly explains my time in the LOT program.

Before starting the program, I was feeling drained, unmotivated, and unsure as to whether or not I wanted to stay in the ECE field. From my very first meeting with my mentor and cohort, I started to feel some excitement coming back.

By the end of the program, I was inspired, ready to make change and excited to be in the ECE field. I think a program like this would be beneficial to so many ECE's. I feel that it's time to get our kids back outside and allow them to learn all those valuable lessons that the land can teach us.

It's similar with educators too. We need to feel confident with being outside, allowing risky play, and letting kids just be!

A big part of my excitement comes from my mentor. She was (and still is) incredibly supportive and gave me the encouragement I needed to want to stay in the field. It wasn't until this program that I knew just how important having a mentor and peer group is.”

TO WHAT EXTENT CAN CHANGES BE ATTRIBUTED TO THE PROGRAM?

At this stage, quantitative changes cannot be attributed to the program because cohort 1 did not include a comparison group. This was the intentional design for the evaluation, as cohort 1 provided an initial small-scale test of project and data systems. The evaluation design intends to attribute changes to the program in analysis of results from cohorts 2 and 3.

While change across all participants cannot be assessed, individual participants provided examples illustrating how they believed LOT has changed their practice as part of the qualitative data collection. One photovoice participant shared the following narrative and photo:

Free to Be – Respecting Others in Our Shared Environment



“Before LOT impacted the children at our centre snails had no rights. When they were discovered, the children believed that they had all the control. They could choose where a snail would live. In a plastic box. They could decide what the snail would like to decorate his home with. They chose rocks, leaves, grass and flowers that they picked from the snail's garden home. They determined who his friends would be. The snail did not require a companion or family member to keep him company, humans would be his new family. They dictated what the snail could eat. The decorations in his plastic shoebox and maybe a slice of cucumber generously donated from someone's lunch box. They also controlled where the snail could travel too. Anywhere the snail wanted to, as long as he stayed in the box.

After LOT impacted our program, the snails were emancipated! This spring there was a newfound respect for the life of living things that shared our playground garden. When this snail made the mistake of crawling out onto the sidewalk following a morning rainfall, an eagle-eyed child spotted him. Gently he picked up the snail, speaking in a soft and reassuring voice, "It is okay little guy we will find you somewhere safe to go where nobody will step on you." He asked the educator, "Where can we put the snail, so he won't get squished?"

The educator asked the child where he thought would be a safe place for a snail. The child replied, "Somewhere away from feet, maybe up in a tree?" The educator agreed that sounded like a safe place and the child walked over to a maple tree and held his hand close to the trunk so that the tiny snail could crawl on and make his way to safety.

When his peers asked why he had let the snail go he told them, "That snail is a living thing, it has a family, and it should be able to back home when it wants to." His peers agreed that he had made a good choice for the snail.

I can only credit our increased focus on caring for the earth and all its species since the beginning of LOT for this change in the level of respect for the rights of another living thing that was demonstrated by the children on this day. How this experience will impact their growth and development as they mature will become evident over time. Hopefully they will continue to demonstrate their ability to be caring, empathetic humans who believe in social justice for all ... even snails."

WHAT PARTICULAR FEATURES OF THE PROGRAM AND CONTEXT MADE A DIFFERENCE?

The interim survey for cohort 1 was completed by 39 participants midway through the program. Respondents rated all aspects of the program as valuable, including the online modules, outdoor reflection activities, small group meetings and written communication, and the welcome package they received in the mail. The online modules were identified as most valuable at that time, while written communication with their small group had the most mixed ratings (ranging from 'not much' in terms of value to 'a lot').

The end of program survey asked participants to rate their satisfaction with various aspects of the LOT program. Of those who interacted with the "learning community" (weekly group discussions and meetings), nearly 90 per cent agreed that it contributed to learning new pedagogy, further confirming that both the format and the content were valued aspects of the LOT program. Participants in the qualitative data collection also cited the videos (especially the one featuring the licensing officer), the grounding at the beginning of each lesson, and being able to work at their own pace as being valuable.

As mentioned earlier, the exclusively online format of LOT posed a challenge for some participants. Some did not identify as "tech-savvy" and had to persist through technical and connectivity issues. Project partners heard feedback about participants wanting the material in a book "so we can bring it anywhere". Having the course accessible on the Hub allowed participants to access it anywhere they had a device, but this may not represent how some

participants want to interact with the program. This was echoed by the participants in the qualitative data collection:

“I would have liked it if it was something that I could bring with me where I go, rather than always than having to go onto the computer because I'm on the computer a lot. I like paper. I like holding something and being able to flip and then look back at what we've learned, what's been done right and what to review”. – LOT participant

TO WHAT EXTENT IS THE LOT PROGRAM SELF-SUSTAINING?

At this early stage, the evaluation can provide only very preliminary insight into this question. For the LOT program to be self-sustaining, it needs to recruit enough eligible educators (including Indigenous educators), applying during each intake and participating in the program, and sufficient “graduating” participants to engage in the mentor training for the next cohort.

Preliminary data from the end-of-program survey suggests that the LOT program may benefit from word of mouth, with half of cohort 1 participants having recommended it to a friend or colleague by the end of the program. Only 6% (n=2) said they were either not likely to recommend the LOT program or neither likely nor unlikely to recommend it.

At the time of this report, the project had completed two intakes that signal overall uptake among ECEs in the province. The first intake resulted in nearly 1,000 applications, but only 546 eligible applications. Twelve per cent of the eligible applications were from Indigenous educators. This resulted in many more applicants than there were program spots for cohort 1, but also demonstrated the interest in the program from those who did not meet eligibility criteria (mainly those not having a current ECE certificate or not currently working in childcare in BC).

By the second intake (for cohorts 2 and 3), the number of applications had dropped to less than 400. Fortunately, nearly all of those who applied were eligible to participate, in contrast to cohort 1. However, project partners had to run a special extended intake specifically for Indigenous educators to ensure sufficient numbers were in the selection pool to meet the goal of 30 per cent Indigenous participation. Ultimately, about 19 per cent of the final sample identified as Indigenous. Given the lower number of applicants overall, this was still an insufficient proportion of Indigenous educators to fill 30 per cent of program spots in cohorts 2 and 3. Final numbers engaged in these cohorts are not available at the time of writing.

The most recent statistics from the Government of BC show that there were 22,429 certified ECEs in BC as of December 2021. Collectively, our evaluation findings suggest that the project may have exhausted current availability of those ECEs interested in applying after only two intakes. Expanding eligibility criteria (for example, to any ECL professional rather than ECEs specifically) might help ensure the LOT program is self-sustaining. It would also welcome a broader pool of Indigenous educators.

The other aspect of sustaining the program is volunteering for mentor training. The project has only one cohort of “graduates” to learn from at the time of writing. Of the 45 participants who completed cohort 1, 17 participated in mentor training (38%). This resulted in sufficient mentors to support cohort 2 and a few extra mentors to serve as backups or for future cohorts. High take up of mentor training has already proven useful as one mentor who had initially signed up to mentor a cohort 2 group had to withdraw before the cohort began; fortunately, the project partners were able to recruit from among those who had been trained and were planning to mentor cohort 3 to take the place of the mentor who withdrew.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The preliminary findings indicate that the LOT program has a lot of promise, and that there are examples demonstrating the ways in which participants have changed their practice as a result of participating in the program. The analysis of the three-month follow up survey for cohort 1 is underway, and cohort 2 is starting the LOT program in September 2022. The next evaluation report (September 2023) will provide the impact evaluation results of the LOT program. To conclude this report, LOT photovoice participants chose the following narrative and photos as representative of their experience in cohort 1.

Limited play – close to nature – children’s garden



“The first photo shows my daycare backyard where children play every day. The ground is covered with artificial grass. It looks very safe for children, but it is hard for them to connect with nature. After taking the LOT course, I realized that it is very important for children to be close to nature. The second photo is when I take children to our neighbourhood park where children can play ball, run and play with each other. The children enjoy fresh air and the nature around them. The third photo shows the children's garden at my daycare. Children can water the flowers using watering cans and use gardening tools to pull out weeds. Children are very proud of their work and learn knowledge of the garden. Thank you to the LOT program for giving me the opportunity to learn how to care for our land and create more activities for children for them to connect to nature”.

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