



# Learning Outside Together

## Mentorship Report

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ECEBC | early childhood educators of BC



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>LOT Mentorship Program Description</b>	<b>2</b>
Background	2
LOT Mentorship Program	2
<b>Evaluation Scope and Methodology</b>	<b>3</b>
Evaluation Goals	3
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Evaluation Results</b>	<b>4</b>
Mentors' Experiences in the LOT Program	5
Take-Away Skills & Knowledge Gained as a Mentor	10
Mentors' Recommendations for Improvement to the LOT Program	12
<b>Conclusions and Recommendations</b>	<b>14</b>
Conclusions	14
Recommendations	15
<b>Appendix A</b>	<b>17</b>
Focus Group Protocol	17

# LOT MENTORSHIP PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

## BACKGROUND

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 of Land as Teacher and promising practices related outdoor learning, to futureproof ECL primarily through the development and delivery of an outdoor learning training program for early childhood educators (ECEs). 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 Centre, with the other 20 per cent funded through an anonymous donor.

## LOT MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

Participants who previously completed<sup>1</sup> the LOT program are invited to apply to become mentors to upcoming cohorts. The duties of the mentors primarily include (1) leading weekly discussion groups with participants on program content, (2) providing general support to participants' learning of the course content, and (3) administrative duties such as providing participants with guidance on how to navigate administrative issues as well as tracking and submitting professional development hours to ECEBC. Although the number of participants in each group can vary, mentors are typically responsible for up to 8 participants in their group.

Mentors receive an honorarium to support their participation in the mentorship program and are welcome to participate in the mentorship program for multiple years/cohorts, although preference is typically given to new mentors in order to offer the experience to as many individuals as possible.

Mentors can in turn apply to become mentor-facilitators, who provide support to mentors. These mentor-facilitators also receive an honorarium to support their participant and are welcome to participate as mentor-facilitators for multiple years/cohorts. Mentor-facilitators must have been a mentor at least once in order to qualify for the role.

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<sup>1</sup> According to LOT professional development hours policy, completion is defined as receiving credit for at least 80% of the required hours in the program, as determined by their module progression and the participants' mentor.

In addition to seeking guidance from the mentor-facilitators, mentors are encouraged to discuss content with and seek support from their peers in the mentorship program.

The purpose of the mentorship program is not only to bolster participant learning and engagement with the LOT program, but also to facilitate professional development and skills-building for LOT program alumni. Mentors are encouraged to develop their group facilitation skills as leaders in their LOT groups, providing guidance and advice to participants as they navigate the program and its content. Furthermore, allowing ECEs to move from the “participant” role to “mentor” to “mentor-facilitator” roles promotes sustainability for the LOT program, as learners in the program then become educators to future cohorts.

Mentorship training consists of 4 modules and is delivered in the same manner as the participant program: asynchronous online content with synchronous weekly meetings. This is delivered over 4 weeks, at which point mentors begin supporting a group of participants. During the first weeks of the participant course, mentors continue meeting weekly with their group of peer mentors and the mentor-facilitator. These peer-mentor/facilitator-mentor meetings may become less frequent over the 3 months of the participant program, depending on the need and decisions of these small groups.

The content of the mentorship training includes reflecting on mentorship and collaborative learning relationships, group formation, complexities and typical challenges, as well as facilitation skills and logistical considerations.

## EVALUATION SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

### EVALUATION GOALS

The purpose of this study is to understand the value that mentorship adds to the LOT program. Specifically, the goals are to:

- Describe mentors’ experiences in the LOT mentorship program. This includes general experiences in the program, along with any successes or barriers that mentors experienced in providing mentorship to their participants.
- Determine what knowledge and take-away skills mentors report gaining because of participating in the mentorship program.
- Obtain recommendations from mentors on how to improve the mentorship program and LOT experience for participants.



## METHODOLOGY

In September 2023, 33 mentors from Cohorts 2 and 3 were invited to participate in focus groups. Given that mentors in Cohort 1 were integral to the development of the mentorship program and had not previously engaged in the program as a “participant,” we chose only to recruit individuals who had mentored in Cohorts 2 and 3. As such, all mentors in the sample had previously completed the LOT program as a participant prior to joining the program as a mentor, and had participated as a mentor in at least one cohort.

Mentors were invited to participate in one of two focus group sessions held over Zoom, with focus group assignment being dependent on mentor’s availability for the session times. Given that we received a manageable number of responses to the focus group invitations, all mentors who expressed interest and who were available for at least one of the focus group meeting times were invited to participate. We held online focus groups in October 2023 with 18 mentors who had mentored in Cohort 2 (N = 5), Cohort 3 (N = 12), or both Cohorts 2 and 3 (N=1) of the LOT program. Some participants also had experience as mentor-facilitators. Although drawing from such a large pool of LOT educators allowed us to hear about diverse program experiences, it also meant that experiences as a mentor and especially as a participant were not necessarily reflective of the most recent iteration of the LOT program.

The focus group sessions lasted approximately 1.5 hours, and mentors received a \$100 retail gift card for their participation. All focus group members provided consent at the beginning of the session to have the Zoom meeting recorded.

The focus group protocol guide is available in Appendix A.

## EVALUATION RESULTS

After the focus group sessions, the recorded discussions were transcribed and recurring themes/topics pertaining to the evaluation areas of interest were extracted. Each theme is described below according to its related area of interest topic. Since all mentors were former LOT participants, at times it was difficult to distinguish between effects of the program experienced as a participant compared to those experienced as a mentor. When possible, we try to specify the context of each finding, but in many cases, the outcomes of the mentorship program cannot be fully isolated from the outcomes of the LOT program.

## MENTORS' EXPERIENCES IN THE LOT PROGRAM

### Positive Program Experiences

Overall, mentors enthusiastically expressed that they gained valuable experience by participating in LOT as a participant and a mentor – both from a personal and professional standpoint. In reflecting on their experience, many mentors felt that the program far exceeded their initial expectations in terms of personal enjoyment. For example, one participant explained:

*“When I joined [LOT], I came in here to get my renewal hours. But I didn’t know that I’d be learning so much out here, making new connections, making new friends.” - LOT mentor*

This demonstrates a continuing passion for LOT, including the content and experiential knowledge gained by participating in it. The program has clearly become deeply meaningful for many of the participants who continue to remain involved with it.

### Building Connection with Other ECEs

Mentors in the focus groups widely agreed that the opportunity to build connections with other ECEs was one of the most valuable benefits of the LOT program. A handful of mentors reported staying in close contact with one another after the program, often talking or messaging daily about life events. When a focus group participant proposed the idea of a “mentorship reunion,” the idea was highly welcomed by the others in the group. As one mentor explained;

*“I loved the content of the program, but I found that my favourite part was the community... like the community of people that I met.... We would spend, like, probably 40 minutes before just, like, checking in with each other... We text each other every day, [and] if someone has a problem or they’re like, ‘hey, like, can you send me a copy of your sickness policy? Or, this?’ Like, it was just really valuable in that way.” - LOT mentor*

In addition to remaining close friends after the program, some mentors reported that their new connections with other ECEs benefitted their professional lives as well. For example, one mentor described how they had used the mentorship program to network with other ECEs and had ultimately been successful in finding job opportunities through their new connections.

### Knowledge Exchange and Confidence

In addition to building connections with other ECEs, the theme of “knowledge sharing” emerged as an important outcome of the mentorship program. Most mentors reported that the

opportunity to learn about outdoor education through the lens of Indigenous knowledge and practices was a primary draw for them to participate in the program. Mentors appreciated the opportunity to further their knowledge on Indigenous teachings and practices, both by reviewing content from the modules and learning from other ECEs. Although a few mentors reported that it could sometimes be intimidating to be in discussion groups with highly knowledgeable or highly experienced educators, most also felt that this dynamic offered a good learning opportunity to mentors and participants alike. As one mentor described;

*“I had, as well, people who had less knowledge than me, but then a lot of people who had more knowledge than me. It was nice to all, kind of, come together and, like, learn with each other, even though I was the mentor.” – LOT mentor*

Another mentor discussed how they felt more confident in being able to approach their employer with suggestions for outdoor education programming, as they felt they had the support from fellow professionals in the field. As this mentor explained;

*“...I found it gave my opinions and my thoughts on [outdoor learning] more credibility because I had other people with much more letters behind their names standing behind that as well... It gave me more, I guess, credential or more weight with the administration for things that I wanted to implement. So then, when I went to, say, my principal, and then if I had to go to a presentation to the board, there was a lot more resources even I could grasp onto and use, you know? People who had, you know, papers and journals and stuff. So, it wasn't just me over here saying, 'this is what I think we should do.'” – LOT mentor*

## Program Content

In terms of program content, most mentors reported that the LOT program generally provided engaging content to participants and cited the use of videos as a particularly engaging way to present materials. One mentor commented,

*“I'm just really impressed with how well this program delivers learning outside together in an online format. It sounds like it wouldn't work, but it does!” – LOT mentor*

While many mentors reported that the program's content was more involved and intensive than they had originally predicted, they also agreed that participating in the program was ultimately rewarding.

Although mentors were generally satisfied with the LOT program materials, some mentors also felt underwhelmed by the amount of Indigenous content provided by the course. A few mentors commented that they felt this was especially true for ECEs who had experience with outdoor play

already, but who were looking to incorporate an Indigenous perspective into their practice. As one mentor described;

*“I did have one [participant]... she was very experienced in outdoor play and outdoor learning, and she was expecting a little more from the course. So because she’s like, ‘oh, I thought you’d be giving us, like, activities and things to do every week. And I’d come out of it with, like, more material to take back to my classroom.’ Right? I mean, we have some stuff. There’s some stuff within the program itself, but it wasn’t, like, much. So that’s another area that I thought I could provide more resources.” – LOT mentor*

## Program Logistics & Administration

In terms of program logistics, mentors in the focus groups generally agreed that the Zoom meetings were a valuable tool for LOT mentors to facilitate engagement among their groups. They felt the small group set-up was more effective than simply reviewing the content individually because it increased accountability and simply made LOT more fun than other professional development programs. Most mentors reported looking forward to the meetings and described them as being the most enjoyable aspect of the program. As one mentor explained,

*“The Zoom meetings were just a great idea....I even said to my [participants], if you’re feeling like you’re a bit behind, still come to every meeting. And, like, we have that connection, and everyone is always really happy to be there. And, you know, it’s quick. It’s an hour of your evening and it’s once a week.”- LOT mentor*

Reflecting on their own role in the program, most mentors generally felt that having individuals in a “mentorship” role to facilitate discussions on course content was a valuable component of LOT learning. Specifically, mentors across focus groups agreed that the mentor-led group meetings were a powerful tool in helping build a sense of community and share content knowledge. One mentor also shared that the transition from their role as “participant” to “mentor” was generally seamless, allowing former participants in the program to easily become mentors or facilitators, if desired.

Some mentors commented that the facilitators generally played a supportive role to mentors, and that the guidance provided by experienced members of the program was appreciated. As one mentor described,

*“It was great to have the facilitators with you the whole program, even though you cut back on how often you meet. Just knowing that they were there if I needed to, you know, shoot a message or connect with them over anything. Like, that was an option, versus, like, you know, do 5 hours at the beginning and then you’re on your own for the whole program, kind of thing. Like, that connection was really ideal.” – LOT mentor*



However, an equal number of mentors were also generally underwhelmed with the support and communication from program administrators. For example, these mentors commented that communications with program administrators were often slow, leaving mentors anxiously awaiting information needed to run their discussion group sessions. Mentors also noted that the guidelines for tracking participant hours were not always clear, especially in cases where participants displayed varying levels of outward engagement (e.g., more outgoing participants versus those who were more shy). One mentor commented on the amount of administrative duties assigned to their role, saying,

*“...There was a lot more, kind of, like, administrative stuff, which I was fine with... but it just kind of, like, threw me off a little bit and it took me a bit to, kind of, get back on track. Like I wasn’t really expecting as much as there was.” - LOT mentor*

Mentors typically described learning by doing rather than relying on the knowledge or resources gained through the LOT mentorship training, which may not have been comprehensive enough for all of the situations encountered as a LOT mentor.

## Participant Withdrawal from LOT Program

Although mentors generally reported positive experiences from participating in the mentorship program, many also reported being highly concerned about perceived low participant attendance rates. Most mentors in the focus groups had experienced at least some level of participant withdrawal from the program, with some reporting high withdrawal rates in their group. In groups that had experienced higher levels of participant withdrawal, mentors expressed concern that the quality of the LOT program experience could be diminished for participants who remained, as discussion groups were often more challenging with very low participant numbers. This led some mentors to express frustration that participants who exit the program early may not value their placement in the LOT program. As one mentor explained;

*“I’ve gone through things before where, it’s like, if you’ve been selected, you do it because it’s a really big honour to be selected. But I’ve seen multiple people who’ve been selected through this who, it’s like, ‘I’m just choosing not to’ or, you know... ‘I don’t have time in my life now.’” - LOT mentor*

Importantly, some mentors expressed that participant withdrawal from their discussion groups often led them to be concerned about the quality of their own mentorship abilities. For example, these mentors reported wondering whether participants left because they did not feel connected with their group, or because the mentor was unable to communicate the materials effectively. As one mentor described;

*“I had [some] participants who never came and never responded to my emails. Even from the very beginning. So, I was wondering, ‘why did that happen? Some [sort of] miscommunication, I wonder?... Did I do something wrong, or what?’” – LOT mentor*

Some mentors also felt that their own experience in the LOT program was diminished when participants in their group exited the program early. For example, a few mentors from each focus group reported they struggled to grow their skills as a mentor when group sizes were too small. As one mentor explained,

*“Sometimes it was really, really hard. I started this to come out of my shell as well, to talk with everybody, be more expressive. Sometimes I find myself very quiet or it takes me time to open up and talk to people who I know. So we were having fun, we got connected and all that. But three people just to talk? It was hard.” – LOT mentor*

In addition to concerns that high participant withdrawal from the program could lead to a lower-quality experience for other participants in the group, mentors often also expressed disappointment at not knowing the reasons why participants left. While many mentors acknowledged that participants likely leave the program for many unpredictable reasons, some also argued that some departures may be preventable. For example, a few mentors reported that participants withdrew after learning more about the scope of the program and its expectations, suggesting that participants might not be sufficiently prepared for or aware of the level of commitment needed to complete LOT. One mentor explained that some participants in their group had completed several course modules but had never attended the group meetings; this led the mentor to wonder if such participants understood the value of connection that the program offered through the live discussions with other ECE learners.

## Experiences with Technology & the Hub

Challenges associated with navigating the Early Years Professional Development Hub (“the Hub”, the platform on which the LOT program and many other ECL professional development programs in BC are delivered) was a major topic of discussion in the focus groups. The majority of mentors reported that the Hub was difficult to navigate for both them and participants, and as such participants were less inclined to engage with the platform. For example, one mentor explained that encouraging participants to post discussion points on the Hub was often a challenge, as participants often felt it was too much of a hassle to navigate the platform to post. Regarding one participant’s experience with the Hub, a mentor explained;

*“She just couldn’t figure it out. And I said, ‘well, just email me your stuff and I’ll post it on the Hub for you. Like, if you have a picture or if you’ve got some reflections or something.’ And so, she’d email it to me, and I’d post it for her.” – LOT mentor*

Additionally, challenges in navigability posed an accessibility barrier for a few mentors. One mentor explained that they have ADHD, and noted that navigating the Hub to post on participant forums required too many “clicks” to reach.

## TAKE-AWAY SKILLS & KNOWLEDGE GAINED AS A MENTOR

### Becoming Comfortable as a Leader

Mentors across both focus groups described several skills that they felt they had developed or gained through their participation in the mentorship program. One skill that was discussed among mentors was the ability to be comfortable in a leadership role. This sometimes required mentors to move outside of their comfort zones and represented personal growth to embrace a new mindset. As one mentor described, *“Everybody’s waiting for the leader to come in. Then, unfortunately, when you’re the mentor, you are the leader.”*

In describing the different ways that leadership skills can manifest, one mentor explained that they learned to be comfortable with silence in between conversations, while another described becoming more willing to allow the conversation to go on tangents if it opened-up discussion between participants. Furthermore, a few mentors discussed how they learned to be receptive of feedback from participants. As one mentor described;

*“I had one participant early on, kind of like... we talked on the phone, and she was like, ‘you know, sometimes, like, there’s a few people who just, like, take over the whole meeting.’ And she’s, like, ‘I’m not really seeing it from you bringing it back in.’ I was like, ‘oh, that’s probably something I can improve on!’ So I really made a conscious effort to do that, and that was something I learned how to do from the program. But it was nice to be able to take in feedback as well.” – LOT mentor*

Leadership skills were often described as being gained through interactions with participants; attribution to the mentorship training was not prominent in these discussions.

### Facilitation Techniques

In addition to becoming comfortable in their role, mentors also described harnessing several discussion-leading techniques that they used to facilitate conversations in their groups. Many mentors described using open-ended questions to help generate more in-depth conversations between participants and encouraged participants to view the discussion groups as “safe spaces” in which conversation was encouraged to flow freely without the risk of judgement or ridicule. As one mentor described;

*“It takes time to build a community. And I understand that we’re all unique and we all have something to give. And it’s also finding what it is that, like, when there are those quiet moments, or you want to try to bring someone into the conversation, it’s understanding what they’re interested in.” – LOT mentor*

Moreover, encouraging participants to join discussion groups even if they had not completed the assigned modules or readings beforehand was also reported by a few mentors to be a useful technique to promote engagement from those who might otherwise be left behind.

An additional facilitation skill that mentors reported gaining from the program was comfort navigating the technological environment of the Hub and Zoom meetings. This was noted as a somewhat unexpected professional skill they felt they honed through the mentorship program.

## Accommodating Different Learning Styles

Lastly, many mentors emphasized the importance of accepting that participants all have different learning styles and ways of engaging. Most mentors reported that they encountered shy or quiet participants in their group but explained that the way in which they chose to promote engagement from such participants depended on a case-by-case basis. For many mentors, this entailed figuring out what form of group engagement a participant was most comfortable with and accommodating this to allow them to participate more fully. As one mentor described;

*“As a mentor, you might think people aren’t participating, but they are, because everyone has their own ways of participating. So one of the things I learned from somebody was that, you know, they didn’t like to have their camera on because it was extremely distracting to them. You know, looking at this Zoom meeting with their camera on... so they shut their camera off. But to a lot of people, [including myself before this], I go into Zoom meetings and they say ‘you have to have your camera on’, like, it’s a credential. [But] participants can be participating if they’re showing up. They’re participating.” – LOT mentor*

While mentoring and accommodating different learning styles of children was a common experience for the ECEs in this group, interacting with other adults in this way was noted as a new experience. Mentors reported enjoying the novelty and challenge that came with peer learning in this environment.

## MENTORS' RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT TO THE LOT PROGRAM

### Improve Communication & Expectations for Mentors and Participants

When asked to reflect on aspects of the LOT program and mentorship program that could be improved, the majority of mentors expressed a desire to improve participant engagement in the program. As a first measure, mentors are particularly interested in obtaining more information or feedback regarding participants' reasons for not completing the LOT program. Most of the mentors generally agreed that this information would benefit them, as they would be in a better position to understand – and potentially prevent – the circumstances that lead participants to withdraw early.

Secondly, many mentors in both focus groups suggested improving initial communication with participants regarding the commitment needed to complete the program. Given that some participants expressed surprise at the level of commitment needed to complete the program, these mentors believe that reiterating program expectations with participants from the start may help manage expectations about workload and commitment. As one mentor explained;

*“I think some of [the issue] is expectations. Like, there’s a bit of a disconnect. When I signed up [for LOT], I was like, ‘Oh, this is going to be like a workshop. This is going to be, you know, my typical professional development hours.’ And this was not quite that. This was a lot more intense. This was more like a mini college course kind of thing... Like I think some of why people might drop out or not continue is they’re not set up for, like, ‘oh, it’s going to be this intense.’ Because, like, if I knew it was going to be this intense and maybe I was also, like, [handling a major work event], I might not sign up for that.” – LOT mentor*

A suggested potential mechanism for clarifying expectations was introducing a financial incentive structure for the LOT program. For example, one suggestion was to introduce an honorarium to encourage participation in the program, while a few others proposed that LOT consider charging a small, refundable deposit for participants to join the program. With this, participants would be required to pay a small fee upfront but would have the opportunity to earn the deposit back by successfully completing the program. These mentors suggested that this would promote completion of the program and would encourage participants to review the program description and expectations more thoroughly before committing.



## Provide Further Guidance on Indigenous Content

In addition to providing more Indigenous content for mentors to share, mentors voiced their desire to have more guidance on how to broach topics on Indigenous learning. Some mentors explained that they were concerned about mishandling potentially sensitive discussion topics, while others worried that they would be providing incomplete or inaccurate information. As one mentor explained;

*“In my group, we had some [participants] who actually brought the Indigenous content as participants, which was kind of special. But I think it’s better to have it from you guys. We have some information from you, but I was short, so I was looking online on YouTube and everything to fill that gap. So, it would be nice to have it from you.” – LOT mentor*

In many instances, mentors described enjoying setting up their group in a way that was unique and authentic to their experiences; however, in this case, it appeared that there was a concern among non-Indigenous mentors misappropriating Indigenous knowledge, which required specific guidance from the LOT program.

## Improve Ease of Navigation for Technology/the Hub

Although many mentors generally wondered if a more user-friendly platform could be made available to them instead, they did have some suggestions on how to improve the existing platform. One such recommendation was to make content accessible on a mobile device. A few mentors described wanting to access content “on the go,” and felt that sharing content would be easier and more convenient if they did not need to be at a computer to do so. Moreover, a few mentors suggested that participants be given more options on how they can engage on the platform. For example, rather than requiring text responses to online discussion prompts, participants could contribute voice notes or video responses. In these discussions, mentors generally agreed that by giving options on how to participate, the program could accommodate participants’ wide range of learning styles and thus promote more meaningful engagement with the materials.

## Allow for Adequate Time Between Program Schedule Confirmation and First Meeting Session

Following from mentors’ concerns about navigating the Hub, many mentors also noticed that if a participant struggled to access the online content in the first few sessions, and consequently fell behind in modules, they were much less likely to continue with the program. As one mentor described;

*“I can’t remember how much time we actually had, but a fairly short window, from when we knew who the participants would be to when we had our first session. I think that was kind of the key. Like if they could get to the first session, they would participate. They would come, but if they missed one, then trying to get someone into the group afterwards was a difficulty.” – LOT mentor*

A few mentors also reported that their participants did not receive books or materials on time to begin the course, causing them too to fall behind.

Mentors therefore recommend that LOT ensure that all participants have a buffer of time before the start of the course in which they can ask for assistance in accessing program content. This would not only allow administrators time to provide all the necessary materials and links to participants before the first session, but it would also give mentors time to connect with participants to ensure that they were ready for the first session.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrated that LOT mentors had overwhelmingly positive views of LOT and cared deeply about the program. Fostering connection became an important part of the mentor experience, in addition to building and exploring leadership skills. Mentors were enthusiastic to provide feedback on a variety of experiences, including strengths and opportunities related to the program design and content. They provided numerous examples of working through communication challenges to support participants in their groups as well as one another, demonstrating remarkable commitment and resilience. Their determination and expertise identify mentors as essential components and invaluable assets to the LOT program.

Mentors identified leadership and facilitation as key takeaway skills gained from the program. Leadership was interpreted in a variety of ways and meant different experiences and goals for different mentors. Inclusion was noted as a key value as mentors learned how to adjust their own leadership styles to accommodate and welcome various learning and engagement styles. Moreover, they described how these skills largely developed through the process of mentoring; while this included the training and ongoing support provided by LOT, the bulk of examples provided by mentors related to experiences in their small group settings or their own independent learnings.

When asked to provide recommendations for improving the LOT program, mentors identified suggestions related to both the participant and mentor components, reflecting that improving

participant experiences would also improve the mentor experience. A key recommendation was to clarify expectations and improve communication; this includes enhancing participant expectations of the required time commitment as well as providing ample time to trouble-shoot technical issues. Additionally, improving mentors' expectations of attrition and program completion could also ease the tension experienced by mentors who were surprised by or unprepared for the realities of participant completion.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from this study, three options for consideration are presented below to further elevate the experiences of mentors and participants in the LOT program.

### Ensure Mentors are Well-Prepared and Supported

While the majority of mentors expressed that they felt they had gained valuable knowledge and leadership experience as a LOT mentor, most also expressed a desire for better up-front support and resources for mentors. For example, while mentors gained facilitation skills over the course of the mentorship program, they acknowledge that many of these skills were developed from trial-and-error experiences as they navigated discussion groups rather than guided techniques provided by the mentorship program. As gaining mentorship experience is an important goal for many LOT mentors, future cohorts of LOT mentors may benefit from more specific training and guidance on how to best engage with participants and become skilled discussion leaders.

Mentors also expressed a desire for more resources related to the practical aspects of their role. For example, a few mentors pointed out that they relied on the module notes they had taken as a LOT participant when preparing for group discussions as a mentor, as there was no other easy way for them to quickly review the course content. Furthermore, a few mentors commented that the administrative tasks assigned to their role were either unclear (i.e., how to track participant hours) or more involved than they expected. As such, it is likely that mentors would appreciate and benefit from practical guidance in how to review course content and navigate administration tasks.

In both focus groups, mentors expressed a desire for more content on Indigenous learnings that could be shared and discussed between mentors and participants. Although mentors reported that they were able to find some additional resources on their own, they reported that they would prefer to have such information come from LOT, as they were concerned about spreading misinformation on such important and sensitive content. Furthermore, mentors reported that promoting Indigenous learning and teachings was a substantial part of the program's appeal for many applicants, and participants generally felt underwhelmed by the amount of content that

was provided in the end. Given that the focus on Indigenous content may be an important draw for applicants, it may be prudent for LOT to provide additional learning resources to mentors and participants.

Lastly, mentors expressed concern that silence from lost participants often leads mentors to doubt their skills as a mentor and instills feelings of not having done enough to provide participants with an enjoyable experience. A further follow-up study on participant completion was conducted shortly after the current study, informed in part by these findings. Nonetheless, it may be prudent to provide support to mentors to help them adopt a strengths-based view of participant withdrawal. For example, it is important for mentors to recognize that withdrawal does not inherently indicate failure on the part of either the mentor or the participant – attrition is a normal part of program delivery, and some withdrawals are to be expected as participants gain more information or encounter life events that require priorities to shift. Support from facilitators and administrators may help mitigate the feelings of surprise and disappointment from mentors and encourage discussions around how to address these feelings when they do arise.

### Evaluate potential reasons for participant withdrawal from the LOT program.

Although mentors may benefit in the short term from being provided support with how to handle participant withdrawal from the program, mentors expressed a shared goal of providing engaging learning experiences for fellow ECEs via the LOT program, and were concerned that participants who exit early from the program do not reap full benefits from LOT. Although mentors acknowledge that it will not always be possible to identify the reasons why participants do not continue in the program, they suggested that identifying common reasons for participants' withdrawal from LOT would be beneficial to understanding whether improvements to the program design/content, mentorship training, or communication with participants would assist participants in completing the program. As such, exploring the reasons participants generally withdraw from the program may provide valuable insight into how to better accommodate participant needs and interests, thereby facilitating learning and engagement in the LOT program, as well as reducing uncertainty and confusion among mentors who do not know why participants leave the program.

As mentioned above, a follow-up study on completion rates took place shortly after the mentorship study, the details of which are in a complementary SRDC report.

## APPENDIX A

### FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

During the focus groups, mentors were asked to reflect on and discuss various topics relating to their experience in the mentorship program. The topics are described in general terms below and were generally presented to mentors in the same order as they appear here, although researchers encouraged organic discussions and conversations in the moment.

#### Motivation For Becoming a Mentor

To begin the discussion, focus group participants were asked to broadly discuss their motivation for becoming a mentor, along with any expectations they had regarding the LOT mentorship program when they joined. Mentors were also asked to consider whether their experience in the program generally met these initial expectations.

#### What Worked Well & What Needed Improvement

As a second topic of discussion, mentors were asked to reflect on their specific experiences in participating as a mentor in LOT. For this topic, mentors were prompted to discuss any aspects of the program that they felt had worked well, as well as aspects that they felt had not worked well. Per the researchers' probe, this could include reflections on the success of specific course content, of program logistics, and of their experiences moderating discussions with participant groups more generally. After discussing program barriers, the third topic of discussion that we presented to mentors was regarding their experience troubleshooting participants' concerns. Specifically, we asked mentors to reflect on whether there were any concerns raised by participants regarding program components and, if so, how mentors had attempted to address them. Furthermore, if mentors had attempted to address participants' concerns, we probed whether mentors felt confident in their ability to seek help (i.e., from program facilitators, other mentors, etc.) or whether more support from the LOT program was needed to resolve concerns.

#### Experience Mentoring Participants & Leading Discussions

The subsequent two discussion topics pertained to mentors' experiences providing mentorship to participants. We began first by asking mentors to discuss the general level of engagement they had experienced from participants in their group, and what techniques, if any, they had used to encourage engagement from participants. Following from this, we probed whether there were



any aspects of the program that mentors felt limited participants' abilities to complete the program. Furthermore, we inquired whether there were aspects of the program that made it challenging for mentors to provide mentorship to participants, either due to the program's design or due to specific logistical barriers.

## Take-Away Skills & Professional Development

Given that the mentorship program aims to provide participants with skills and knowledge that will benefit their professional life, we asked focus group members to reflect on any skills they had developed as mentors. Although these take-away skills would ideally be related to specific leadership skills gained as a mentor, focus group members were invited to speak to other general skills gained from the program as well.

## Recommendations for Program Improvement

To close out the focus group sessions, we asked mentors to reflect on any recommendations that they had to improve the LOT program. Mentors were encouraged to consider and share ideas for program changes that could improve the experiences of both mentors and participants alike, though more general advice was also welcomed. At this point in the focus groups, participants were invited to share any remaining thoughts on the mentorship program.

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