

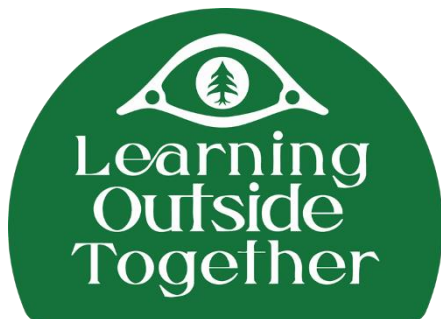


# Learning Outside Together

## Completion Report

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Prepared for:



BC Aboriginal Child Care Society



ECEBC | early childhood educators of BC



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## 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.

## EVALUATION GOALS

The purpose of this report is to describe the experiences of LOT program participants who did not complete<sup>1</sup> the program after registering. Project partners are interested in determining whether some participants exit the program due to barriers or experiences related to the program itself. For example, do participants exit the program due to dissatisfaction with the content or the pace of the modules? Furthermore, project partners wish to understand whether there may be accommodations or adjustments to the program that would facilitate participants completing the program.

### Strengths-Based Approach

As noted in earlier reports, reviewing program completion rates (as defined by the program administrators) in isolation can unfairly undervalue the goals and expectations that participants bring to the program. Program completion can be a sensitive topic which may elicit feelings of shame or failure. This could be due to an over-reliance on Western deficit-based research that assumes negative outcomes are caused by individual shortcomings and often leads to feelings of inferiority<sup>2</sup>. Instead, a strengths-based approach takes the stance that not completing LOT can actually be considered a positive outcome – for example, it could demonstrate good judgement

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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.

<sup>2</sup> First Nations Information Governance Centre, *Strengths-Based Approaches to Indigenous Research and the Development of Well-Being Indicators*, (Ottawa: 2020). 36 pages. Published in June 2020. Ottawa, Ontario.

on the part of a participant who recognizes that it is not a good fit for them, or healthy boundary setting when life events cause their priorities to shift. Lower participation could also reflect efficiency, for example, among participants who can engage with the course content more quickly than others. Regardless of the reason, strengths-based orientations invite us to consider that leaving the program was probably in the best interest of the participant, rather than framing it as a failure on their part or ours.

Nonetheless, participant withdrawal can be associated with perceived negative outcomes, such as feelings of confusion, disappointment, or inadequacy from mentors and other group members. Participant withdrawal, while sometimes unavoidable, can also result in an empty spot in the program that could have otherwise gone to another ECE, as well as financial inefficiencies related to program administrator time and resources, particularly for participants that enroll but do not start the program. Thus, rather than asking “what can participants do differently to be successful in LOT?”, our approach is to frame the question as “what can LOT do differently to support participants’ success?”. This framing is more consistent with strengths-based research in which the dynamic interaction of individual, environmental, and historical contexts are emphasized. Our approach thus requires a critical examination of definitions of “completion” and “success”, and consideration of how to embrace different perspectives to benefit all involved.

## Areas of Interest

This study aims to examine what factors influence participants’ reason(s) for leaving the LOT program. This includes:

- Understanding factors that may be external to the program (such as life changes, changes in career schedules, etc.) and those internal to the program (such as access to required technology, conflicts with other participants, etc.); and
- Understanding what factors motivated participants to register for the program and whether they felt that the program provided them an opportunity to meet their learning goals.

Taken together, this information provides insight into what aspects of the LOT program may be important to participants upon registration, which in turn helps contextualize the circumstances surrounding their leaving the program. Critically, it also helps LOT administrators deliver a program that is responsive to the needs of the community by understanding why ECEs register for LOT in the first place.

Specific probes/questions were also included to further investigate areas of interest that had emerged from previous studies, such as the importance of professional development hours, and experiences of Indigenous educators and those who participated with a colleague, who experienced lower rates of program completion in Cohorts 1-3.

## METHODOLOGY

### Focus Group

Several considerations went into determining the sample for the focus group. First, we recruited individuals who had some interaction with LOT so that they would have something to react or respond to (compared to those who withdrew before starting the program, who would be largely unable to provide constructive feedback). For this reason, we limited the sample to those who completed at least one hour of the LOT program. Second, given the limits of human memory and the fact that interactions with the LOT program may still have been quite brief in peoples' busy lives, we limited the focus group to the current cohort of participants (Cohort 4). This had the additional benefit of ensuring the focus group participants were providing feedback on the most recent iteration of the program, since some changes had been made since the program launched.

Recruiting participants from an active cohort came with challenges and limitations. Importantly, we did not want to “close the door” for any participants who needed to step away but might potentially return to Cohort 4. As a result, we relied on mentors to share the names of participants who had either notified them of withdrawing or who had missed at least three weeks of meetings and had not responded to communication attempts. This list of names was cross-referenced with those who had provided permission to be contacted for evaluation purposes when enrolling in the program. This resulted in a pool of 18 participants. All 18 were invited to join an online focus group and three participants took part in December 2023.

The focus group was held over Zoom and lasted approximately 1 hour. Participants received a \$100 retail gift card for their participation. All focus group members provided consent at the beginning of the session to participate and have the Zoom meeting recorded. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, focus group facilitators made efforts at the beginning of the session to create a judgement-free space, and encouraged participants to provide any honest or critical feedback they were comfortable providing. The focus group questions posed to participants can be found in Appendix A.

### Survey

Given the small number of focus group participants (N=3), a quick survey was developed to help explore completion rates and validate the information collected during the focus group. The sample frame for the survey consisted of former participants from Cohorts 1-3 who had completed at least one hour of LOT but had received credit for fewer than 20 professional development hours. Participants from Cohort 4 were excluded from the survey since we had just contacted them about the focus group. The resulting list had 44 former participants.

These participants were invited to complete a short online survey about their motivations and experiences in the program. Survey questions were adapted from the focus group questions, with modification of some response options to allow for multiple choice selections. The survey link was open for two weeks, and participants were offered a \$10 Amazon gift card for their time. A total of nine participants (six from Cohort 2 and three from Cohort 3) responded to the survey. The survey questions provided to participants can be found in Appendix B.

## EVALUATION RESULTS

Transcriptions from the focus group session (N = 3) and responses to the survey (N = 9) were combined and analyzed according to the two evaluation questions: (1) what were participants' motivations for joining the LOT program and (2) what factors influenced participants' exiting the program early? The themes that emerged from focus group discussions and survey responses are described below. Due to the small sample sizes, we were unable to explore the experiences of Indigenous educators and those who participated in LOT with a colleague.

## PARTICIPANTS' MOTIVATIONS FOR JOINING THE LOT PROGRAM

### Interest in Outdoor Play and Land as Teacher

Participants indicated a similar primary motivation for joining the program; they had a personal interest in outdoor play and Land as Teacher. Participants described wanting to gain more tips and advice about how to integrate outdoor play and Indigenous teachings into their practice with children, especially in cases where resources or time outdoors was limited. As one participant described;

*“I was working at a preschool... and just wanted to get some more information regarding going outside and how we can incorporate that into our classrooms. Because the place I was working at didn't have enough area for outdoor [play]. So, I was looking for some suggestions and some ideas just to expand on that... so when children are outside, we can go outside and think about it. And then when the children are asking questions, I can help them with any answers.” – LOT focus group participant*

This sentiment reflects a desire for both practical knowledge – such as local outdoor areas to explore – as well as inspiration and confidence to apply this knowledge in their daily work. Others described how they were looking for something new or a fresh perspective to apply in their practice. In addition, the opportunity to connect with other ECEs also played a factor in former participants' decision to join the program.

## Low Emphasis on Professional Development Hours

Professional development hours did not emerge as a strong motivating factor in this study for joining the program, with most of the respondents indicating that the hours were “not at all important” or only “a little bit important” to their decision to join LOT. One focus group participant mentioned that they were not aware of the professional development hours associated with the program, or the full amount of hours available, but felt that they “would have done [the program] anyways.” Others were aware of the professional development hours but cited the low-cost of the program to be a more substantial appeal. As one participant described;

*“I was aware of [the professional development hours]. I looked a little deeper and kind of did a little bit of research. And then what really drew me in was that there was no cost... A lot of workshops that I would have to attend have, like, a \$30 to \$100 cost.” – LOT focus group participant*

## FACTORS INFLUENCING PARTICIPANTS EXITING THE PROGRAM EARLY

Participants typically described a multitude of factors contributing to leaving the LOT program, rather than a single identifiable cause. The most common reason for not completing LOT was a lack of personal availability, but this was due to a variety of factors both external (e.g., personal health emergency) and internal (relatively high workload) to the LOT program. Additional factors include the program design/content and lack of alignment with expectations.

### Personal & Professional Life Changes

Survey results indicated that “changes in personal or work life” and “not enough time” to commit to the program hours were the most common reasons for participants’ departure. Focus group discussions echoed similar experiences, with participants citing unforeseeable changes in work schedules preventing them from continuing with the program after registration. In describing their decision to leave the program, one former participant explained;

*“...I was just ‘real’ with myself and thought, you know maybe I could try this again next year once I’m finally in the rhythm of it... Just because a lot of things hit the fan, just, personally at home. And so I just wanted to – I needed to step back from that, unfortunately.” – LOT focus group participant*

Others described experiencing personal or family health emergencies that required their attention.

## Workload & Scheduling Barriers

Some participants cited the workload associated with LOT as a barrier. When asked what might have enabled them to continue in the program, one participant suggested making the required homework more “flexible” and “less of a time commitment,” while another suggested making the program more “self-paced” with fewer online meetings. A few participants expressed surprise by the amount of commitment required of them. As one participant explained;

*“In the summer, I was like, ‘I’m going to, you know, set the bar for myself quite high.’ And in that first meeting, I appreciated the person leading it breaking everything down for us and just being ‘real’ with us about the program and what was expected and her taking attendance. And so, I, you know, checked the module and really looked into the content of it. And it just was a lot more than I thought it would be. But I knew it was full of really good content.”- LOT focus group participant*

Scheduling barriers did not appear to be a strong contributing factor among former participants. However, one focus group participant explained that the group meeting times were inconvenient for them given their work schedule, and suggested they may have been able to complete the program if they had been able to find a group meeting time that worked for them.

## Small Group Meetings

While participants generally reported enjoying their experience in the LOT program and expressed appreciation for their group mentors, some participants reported that they were generally underwhelmed by the quality of the discussion groups, with one participant noting the small group size as a challenge. One participant felt as though their mentor lacked experience with the program content, while another commented that their mentor seemed unprepared to lead discussion groups (e.g., speaking too much, lacking engagement with others). As one participant explained;

*“I didn’t feel there was enough meaningful connection and the [mentor] had just taken the program before, which I think led to a lack of engagement.” – LOT survey respondent*

Additionally, one participant expressed disappointment at the direction of conversations within their discussion group. As this participant described;

*“My group seemed to be more about convincing other educators to actually go outdoors. Their views on children’s abilities and outdoors don’t align with mine. I didn’t need to be convinced being outdoors was a good idea.” – LOT survey respondent*



Such challenges emerged as contributing factors and perceived areas of improvement, rather than strong motivations for leaving the program. As mentioned above, they were often discussed in conjunction with other factors such as personal or family emergencies.

## INCIDENTAL FINDINGS

One survey response highlighted a discrepancy between the program definition of completion and the participant’s understanding of completion. This participant assumed they received the survey in error because they “finished the program and got a certificate”. Upon review, it was confirmed that this participant received a certificate for approximately half the possible program hours (PD certificates were issued for those completing 10 or more hours; however, ‘certificates of completion’ were only given to those who completed at least 24 hours, or 80% of the program). This participant’s experience may be reflective of others in the sample invited to participate in this study, who felt that they did complete LOT (and thus did not respond to our invitation to participate in the evaluation) and/or of others in LOT for whom the professional development hours were of minimal focus. If we were to consider these participants’ definitions of success, we might need to update our thinking and revise what LOT completion looks like.

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### CONCLUSIONS

Participants in the study identified the main motivations for enrolling in LOT as gaining new perspectives, skills, and knowledge related to outdoor play and Land as Teacher, as well as connecting with other ECEs. These goals are broadly consistent with the main outcomes of the LOT program, as described in the [Impact Report](#). Gaining professional development hours did not emerge as a strong motivation for registering in LOT among those who participated in this study.

The main reason for not completing LOT is a lack of personal availability, often due to unforeseeable personal circumstances external to the LOT program and potentially exacerbated by the workload/design of LOT. When we emphasize the interaction of contextual environmental and historical factors, consistent with a strengths-based approach, we see that the complex issues faced by former participants shed light on some of the systemic issues facing the ECL workforce and the groups disproportionately represented within it, such as women, Indigenous and racialized people, and individuals not born in Canada. These issues are not simply personal or programmatic – they are broader issues impacting the entire sector and society.

For example, participants' experience of having limited availability to complete LOT due to personal and professional commitments is, in part, a reflection of sectoral issues such as a lack of paid time off for professional development (despite it being a requirement for ECEs), and low rates of mental and physical health benefits available to ECL professionals<sup>3</sup>. In turn, these challenges are further exacerbated by larger social issues such as poorer health outcomes for women and racialized individuals, and the uneven burden of unpaid domestic labour, which typically falls on women. Although many of these issues are external to the LOT program, ignoring the broader context in which the program operates risks perpetuating the negative stereotyping that is common in deficit-based research, which focuses on the individual in isolation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings from this study, some options for consideration are presented below to further support participants in the LOT program.

### Allow for More Flexibility in How/When Participants Complete the Program

Given that changes in participants' availability was frequently cited as a barrier to program completion, allowing more flexibility in how and when participants complete the program may reduce the number of individuals who exit the program early. For example, offering more enrollment options (e.g., spring, summer, winter) may encourage participants to sign up for the LOT program when they have more immediate availability. At the same time, setting a reliable annual schedule would allow potential participants to plan around regular LOT intakes such that they could sign up in advance if that was preferable to them. Regardless of how far in advance participants choose to enroll, a set LOT schedule would provide administrators with adequate preparation and planning time.

Moreover, allowing the program to be completed at a more individualized pace may encourage participation from those who fall behind in content. For example, offering a Part 1 and Part 2 of the program would allow participants to enroll for the program in smaller blocks of time, allowing them to schedule these blocks as convenient to them (e.g., consecutively after one another, or months apart). This is in line with the adjustment made for Cohort 4 in which more frequent breaks were scheduled, such that individuals who "fell behind" in the module content have time to catch up with their group.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ecebc.ca/sector-initiatives/labour-market#Reports>

Ultimately, a single solution is unlikely to work for all potential participants; thus, integrating flexibility and responsiveness as values of the LOT program broadly is one important way to set participants up for success.

## Consider the Motivations and Learning Goals of Participants when Defining Program Success

Pragmatically, another way to provide flexibility in program completion is to fundamentally rethink what completion looks like. Given feedback obtained in this study, it seems clear that participants generally show a high level of personal interest in the program content and may be notably less motivated by the prospect of obtaining a professional development certificate. In other words, individuals may choose to join LOT not necessarily because they are interested in fulfilling a program requirement, but because they are interested in achieving *personally defined* learning goals. For example, a participant may join the program primarily because they are interested in gaining more tips about how to facilitate outdoor play; achieving this goal may define how “successful” the program was for them. If this is the case, then it may not be appropriate to determine whether a participant “successfully” completed the program based on the number of hours they completed or whether they received a certificate at the end.

The example of the participant who rejected the idea that they did not complete LOT also provides a powerful reminder that prioritizing certain definitions and worldviews can limit our understanding of a situation from the participant perspective. If LOT participants are not motivated to complete professional development hours or do not feel that completing the program is in their best interest, it is important for LOT administrators to respect their autonomy and not assume that we know what is “best” for another person.

Further, incorporating participants’ definition of success as an outcome measure would help ensure that the program remains responsive and relevant to the changing needs of ECL professionals. Given the small group design of the program, mentors are well-positioned to encourage participants to consider their own learning goals and measure progress against these.

## APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

During the focus group, participants were asked to reflect on and discuss various topics relating to their motivations and experience in LOT, as well as reasons for leaving and any changes that they would like to see to the program.

The topics are described in general terms below and were generally presented in the same order as they appear here, although researchers encouraged organic discussions and conversations in the moment. As noted above, researchers framed the discussion in a strengths-based way and asked participants for their honest feedback, assuring them that any “negative” feedback about the program would be taken constructively rather than personally.

### EXPERIENCE JOINING LOT

To begin the discussion, focus group participants were asked to think back to when they first applied to participate in LOT, as well as their expectations about the program. They were probed to share how important or not the professional development hours / certificate were in their decision to apply. Researchers also asked participants to describe what interactions they had with the LOT program before leaving, to help understand their level of engagement.

### REASONS FOR LEAVING LOT

Next, researchers guided a discussion around reasons for leaving LOT, including potential interactions of factors. Focus group participants were asked to share, in as much detail as they were comfortable, their specific reasons, since something like “not having personal availability” can manifest in a variety of ways across participants. Specific potential motivations that were of interest to LOT partners that had not been spontaneously offered by participants were prompted by researchers. Researchers further probed about the process of withdrawing to better understand whether participants reached out to mentors or group members before/after withdrawing.

### REFLECTING ON LOT

The subsequent discussion related to former participants’ overall impressions of LOT and whether they would be interested in taking the program again in the future. In some cases, researchers probed what changes participants would like to see LOT make before re-enrolling and whether there were specific barriers to participation that had not yet been discussed. Focus group participants were asked to share if, given the circumstances surrounding their exit from

the program, there was anything that LOT could have done to allow them to continue in the program.

Finally, to close out the focus group, researchers asked former participants to reflect on any specific recommendations to improve participant experience as whether there was anything else that hadn't yet been discussed or given sufficient attention that they would like to share.

## APPENDIX B: COMPLETION SURVEY QUESTIONS

### PART I: EXPERIENCE JOINING LOT

To start, we'd like you to think back to when you first applied to participate in LOT.

1. What were your motivations for participating in LOT? (***select all that apply***)
  - (1) I had a personal interest in outdoor play and/or Land as Teacher.
  - (2) I wanted to gain specific tips/advice on facilitating outdoor play as an ECE.
  - (3) I wanted to connect with other ECEs.
  - (4) I was looking for professional development hours.
  - (5) I was encouraged to apply by a colleague/friend/employer who had previously participated in the program.
  - (6) I don't remember/prefer not to answer.

Please feel free to elaborate on your reason(s) for participating in the LOT program (optional).

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2. How important were the professional development hours in your decision to join LOT?  
(***scale***)
  - (1) *not at all important*
  - (2) *a little bit important*
  - (3) *fairly important*
  - (4) *very important*

### PART 2: REASONS FOR LEAVING LOT

Now, please think about your reasons for leaving LOT.

3. Why, ultimately, did you leave the LOT program? (***select all that apply***)
  - (1) I did not have enough time to commit to the program hours.
  - (2) The meeting times did not work for my schedule.
  - (3) There was a change in my personal/work life.
  - (4) The program was not what I expected it to be.
  - (5) I experienced technological barriers that kept me from accessing LOT.
  - (6) I experienced conflict with my mentor / members of my group.
  - (7) I had questions or concerns about the program that went unanswered.

(8) I don't remember/prefer not to answer.

Please feel free to elaborate on your reason(s) for leaving the LOT program (optional).

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### PART 3: REFLECTING ON LOT

4. If you had the opportunity to participate in LOT again, would you? (**scale**)
- (1) Yes
  - (2) No
  - (3) Unsure

5. If you could change one aspect of the LOT program, what would it be?

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### PART 4: SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT & CLOSING

6. Is there anything else about your experience in LOT you would like to share?

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Thank you very much for sharing your experiences and feedback – it is very important to us.

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