

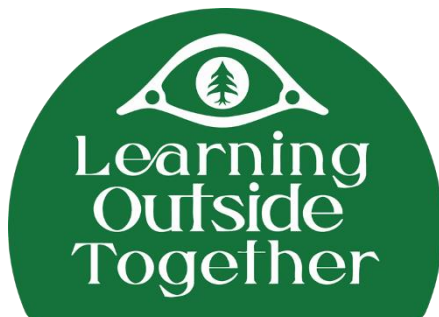


# Learning Outside Together

## Final Report

April 25, 2024

JESSICA MCQUIGGAN | KEMI ODEGBILE | SYDNEY ROSSITER |  
JOHN SERGEANT | REUBEN FORD



Prepared for:



BC Aboriginal  
Child Care Society



ECEBC | early childhood  
educators of BC

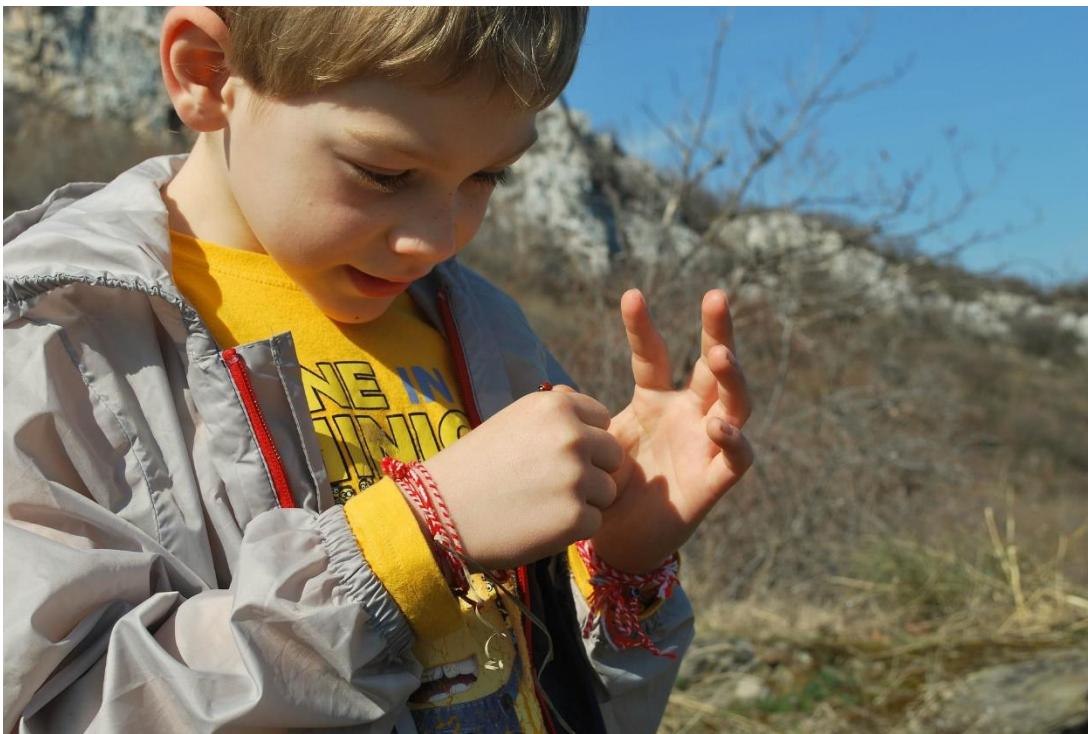


## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are deeply grateful to the many individuals who dedicated time and energy to this project. This work would not have been possible without contributions from participants, partners, content creators, and members of the LOT Steering Committee. We are honoured to reflect on our work together through this report.

In the spirit of learning together, we invite the reader to approach this report with curiosity and a sense of presence in the current moment. Our hope is that you can find inspiration and wisdom to further the important work being done to embrace time outdoors and think deeply about our collective relationships with the land and one another.

We would like to acknowledge the traditional and unceded territories of the many First Nations across the province known as British Columbia, and specifically the land of the Coast Salish peoples, on which SRDC's Vancouver office is located. The x<sup>w</sup>məθkwəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and Səlilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations have cared for this land and embraced it as a teacher since time immemorial. We are grateful for their stewardship and for the places we live and work.



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Rationale	1
Big Picture Aims and Objectives	1
<b>Background</b>	<b>2</b>
Overview of LOT	2
Evaluation Purpose & Questions	6
<b>Findings</b>	<b>8</b>
Implementation Study	8
Impact Study	12
Mentorship Study	19
Completion Study	24
<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>27</b>
Recommendations and Next steps	28
<b>References</b>	<b>29</b>

## INTRODUCTION

### RATIONALE



**The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in major disruptions to many sectors, highlighting the need for innovative and flexible solutions that have the potential to prevent similar economic and social impacts in the future.**

This includes solutions that bolster economic recovery, as well as provide supports for individuals to help navigate uncertainty and maintain their livelihoods.

Considering these circumstances, the Future Skills Centre (FSC) released a call for proposals from organizations for projects that explore and demonstrate ways in which innovative skills development and training can promote resilience in the face of social and economic upheavals such as those brought on by the pandemic.

### BIG PICTURE AIMS AND OBJECTIVES



**The Learning Outside Together (LOT) proposal was one of the successful projects funded through the FSC call for proposals.**

In addition to the project specific intentions (summarized in subsequent chapters, as well as described in full in standalone reports), general project objectives include:

- Design, develop, test and scale a new model for sector-based skills development pilots that is demonstrably different from current approaches;
- Target sectors, regions, and populations where disruption – positive and negative – will be most pressing and long-lasting; and
- Establish partnerships that are intentional about breaking new ground and deliberate about testing innovative models.

## BACKGROUND

### OVERVIEW OF LOT



**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 COVID-19 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<sup>1</sup>.

Currently in BC, child care 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 professionals to meet their ongoing 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 of Land as Teacher and promising practices related to 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. Funding for four cohorts was secured, with 80 per cent being funded through Future Skills Centre and the other 20 per cent funded through an anonymous donor.

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.outdoorplaycanada.ca/should-i-go-outside-in-the-covid-19-era/>

## PROGRAM DESCRIPTION



**The LOT program is delivered over three months, with participants completing at least ten asynchronous units, each focusing on a topic related to land-based experiences.**

Indigenous traditional knowledge and wisdom is incorporated into the course content, covering issues such as sustainability and honouring the land and traditional territories. LOT is accessed through online units on ECEBC’s Early Years Professional Development Hub, with the option of printed materials for those with limited internet access. The units contain a mixture of learning materials, including narrative interviews, written materials, and reflection exercises. Participants also receive a waterproof journal as well as a seed to plant at the beginning of the program.

Additionally, each participant is connected with a mentor and a small learning group of approximately seven other participants, who share the same mentor. Mentors facilitate 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 takes place primarily virtually. With the exception of the first cohort, mentors are recruited from previous cohort participants who have completed LOT.

### *Program Timeline*

At the time of writing this report, four cohorts of participants have completed the LOT program. The timeline and number of participants for each is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**      **Timeline and Participation Numbers of the Original LOT Project**

	Timeline	Number Enrolled	Number Completed <sup>2</sup>
<b>Cohort 1</b>	March – June 2022	61	44
<b>Cohort 2</b>	Sept – Dec 2022	96	40
<b>Cohort 3</b>	March – June 2023	158	80
<b>Cohort 4</b>	Oct 2023 – March 2024	268	157
		<b>583</b>	<b>321</b>

<sup>2</sup> Reflects those who received a certificate of completion, the definition of which shifted slightly for each cohort. In general, it represents participants who completed at least 80% of the required course material as determined by their module progression and mentor. Completion numbers underestimate the total number of participants who completed any professional development hours in LOT.

Although the original LOT project was initially scheduled to end in March 2024, program activities continue through external partnerships and project extensions. One such example is a research study called PRO-ECO 2.0 (“PROmoting Early Childhood Outside”).

PRO-ECO 2.0 is a research project supporting outdoor play in BC’s child care centres, led by researchers at the University of British Columbia and Vancouver Island University<sup>3</sup>. PRO-ECO 2.0 has recruited child care centres across the province to develop the following elements:

1. Updated outdoor play policies;
2. Early childhood educator training and mentorship;
3. Family, Elder, and community engagement;
4. Outdoor space modifications

Building on a pilot study launched in 2020 that determined more support for centre staff was needed, the training and mentorship component of PRO-ECO 2.0 will be the LOT program. Five ECL centres across the province took part in PRO-ECO at the same time as LOT Cohort 4, and although the recruitment was independent of LOT cohorts, previous LOT mentors also served as PRO-ECO mentors. The second phase of PRO-ECO is scheduled to run from April to July 2024 with four more centres participating.

Additionally, the LOT partners recently submitted a BC BID proposal that successfully secured funding for another three cohorts of LOT. The new project will begin in April 2024.

## LOT THEORY OF CHANGE



**A theory of change is a conceptual representation of how the project activities will achieve desired outcomes. It describes the factors that may influence the success of the project.**

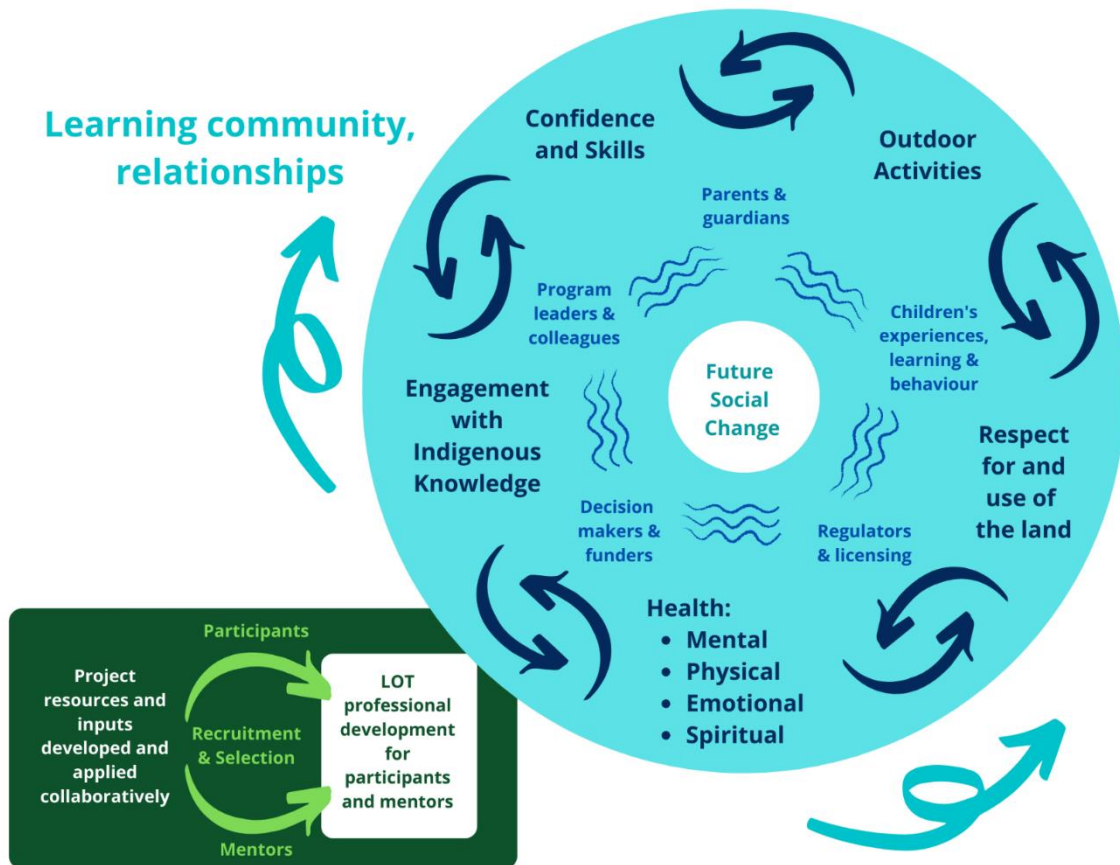
Figure 1 presents the theory of change for the overall project as drafted following consultation with the LOT Steering Committee in fall 2021. At the individual and sector levels, the desired outcomes from the LOT program are built on the assumptions that there is sufficient ECE uptake and demand for the program 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 in general, resulting in – it is hoped – more funders and early childhood education

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://playoutsideubc.ca/pro-eco-2/>

centres investing in LOT, with subsequent adjustments to programming, regulations and licensing being made by decision makers.

**Figure 1 Learning Outside Together Theory of Change**



At the broader community level, the desired outcomes take into consideration existing research showing a positive link between access to nature and child and youth development in several areas, including physical health, mental health, emotional well-being, resilience, and academic success (Dankiw et al. 2020). Research has also linked exposure to nature in childhood with later environmental leadership (Gifford & Chen, 2016; Human Environments Analysis Laboratory, 2015). 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).



## EVALUATION PURPOSE & QUESTIONS



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.

The evaluation seeks to answer the following questions:

### *Design and Delivery*

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?

### *Outcomes and Effects*

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?

### *Value and Fit*

7. To what extent is the LOT program self-sustaining?

## EVALUATION ACTIVITIES



The LOT evaluation covered the first three cohorts of participants over four separate studies.

These studies are summarized in the following sections of this report as well as described in detail in separate reports. The first cohort was designed as a “test” cohort to try out the program. Initially meant to include only 39 participants<sup>4</sup>, the first cohort contributed to the **implementation study** and helped hone the evaluation tools for later program participants. Cohorts 2 and 3 were designed to be much larger (75-125 participants, later increased to nearly 260 over both cohorts) to provide the true test of the LOT program through the **impact analysis** using a delayed-start comparison group. In addition, two ad hoc studies were added to further document the impact of the **mentorship program** as well as to better understand patterns observed in **completion rates** across the cohorts. Although cohort 4 was not originally intended to be part of the evaluation activities, the mentorship and completion studies drew on participants and mentors from all cohorts, including cohort 4.

This report provides a brief summary of these four studies and then reviews overall conclusions and recommendations arising from the project.

---

<sup>4</sup> Later increased to 64 seats following an unexpectedly large demand for the program.

## FINDINGS

### IMPLEMENTATION STUDY

#### BACKGROUND



The LOT program implementation study was based on the experiences of cohort 1 participants. This pre-post evaluation was designed to test the program parameters and evaluation tools. Findings from this study were used to refine the approach to cohorts 2 & 3.

This mixed methods study was informed by data collected at both the participant and project administration level. At the participant level, survey responses from consenting participants collected information at several time intervals about demographics, education and employment status, and skills and knowledge related to the course content. Focus group participants also provided more in-depth information about their experience with the course, challenges, successes, and early outcomes. Finally, participants engaged in Photovoice took pictures and developed short narratives in response to framing questions about their experience with LOT<sup>5</sup>.

At the administration level, discussions at partner and steering committee meetings, as well as updates from mentors regarding implementation lessons learned were incorporated into the study findings. The section below summarizes key implementation findings as well as preliminary outcomes from cohort 1. The full study is described in the publication: Learning Outside Together: Interim Report<sup>6</sup>.

#### *Participant Profile*

A total of 61 ECEs were enrolled in LOT cohort 1. The majority of participants identified as female, and most of them were between the ages of 30-65. Over half had 10+ years experience working with children, and 44% identified as Indigenous. All regions of the province were represented, with 64% of participants working in urban settings. Two-thirds were somewhat experienced outdoors, and 95% worked in group settings.

---

<sup>5</sup> Photovoice is a participatory research methodology that aims to promote critical dialogue through group discussions of photographs. For more information, see Wang & Burris, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.ecebc.ca/application/files/6816/6970/6154/Interim\\_Evaluation\\_Public\\_Report\\_22-Nov-22.pdf](https://www.ecebc.ca/application/files/6816/6970/6154/Interim_Evaluation_Public_Report_22-Nov-22.pdf)

## IMPLEMENTATION STUDY KEY FINDINGS



**Project administration, recruitment of participants, LOT course content, and evaluation framework and data collection instruments all worked well. Preliminary participant outcomes showed promise, with qualitative study participants demonstrating the ways in which they have changed their practice because of participating in LOT.**

Applications for cohort 1 were much higher than anticipated, with 946 applications for 39 spots. Due to this overwhelming response, the number of available spots was increased to 64. The 61 participants who eventually enrolled in the program were supported by seven seasoned mentors who were already experienced with outdoor play and Land as Teacher concepts.

The project administration was an important component of the project, ensuring that the project partners, steering committee, and program content creators had protected time to support course development, identify potential issues and collaboratively troubleshoot challenges that came up during the design and implementation phases of the project. This included extending the project timeframe to allow for collaborative co-design incorporating the principles of Two-Eyed Seeing into all components of the project; troubleshooting issues around implementation of the small groups; eligibility criteria and supporting participants using the Early Years Hub (the online platform on which LOT was accessed).

Although outcomes were not an explicit focus of this study, there were some positive preliminary findings. These included high completion rates (74%), participants reported more time spent outdoors with children, more improvements to their outdoor spaces, and more confidence taking children outdoors at the end of the program compared to at the beginning of the program. They also reported deeper engagement with Indigenous knowledge and increased skills related to being outdoors with children.

## Q̓əmdzəkʷ - Salmonberry

---

“For me the connection to our language and culture during the LOT program and being out on the land was identifying the plants by also using our Liqwala/Kwakwala language. I'm still learning the words for plants using our language and this is a way that helps me and the children learn together. My continuing goal is to create a field guide for our area that identifies the plant name(s) in our language and their extended parts. Salmon berries are something that grow in our territory and are a source of foods for many in the Springtime”.  
--LOT Cohort 1 Photovoice Participant

---



## IMPLEMENTATION STUDY LESSONS LEARNED



**Sufficient time is needed at the outset to ensure meaningful collaboration and implementation of Two-Eyed Seeing at all stages of the project. Evaluation results were used to make modifications to LOT program application materials, the small groups, and the evaluation tools.**

Changes were made to the application process to ensure more clarity about program eligibility and program time commitments, as well as more efficient mentor and participant matching. Modifications were also made to the survey instruments to eliminate questions that had high nonresponse rates, as well as adjust questions where participants already scored highly (hence not possible to measure change). Satisfaction was high with various aspects of the LOT program, especially the weekly group discussions and meetings, the videos, and being able to work at their own pace. Photovoice participants chose the following photograph and narrative as being representative of their journey:

### 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”.

--LOT Cohort 1 Photovoice Participant

---

## IMPACT STUDY

### BACKGROUND



The LOT program impact evaluation was a delayed-start pre-post design to assess the impact of the program on a random selection of participants (Cohort 2) compared to a waitlisted control group (Cohort 3).

As described in the impact evaluation report<sup>7</sup>, Difference-in-Differences (DiD) estimation was performed on survey data to isolate both the immediate impacts of the LOT program as well as those changes that were sustained for at least two months after the program ended. Guided by the Theory of Change, survey questions were designed to assess four main topic areas: outdoor programming; health and wellbeing; engagement with Indigenous knowledge; and skills, confidence, and knowledge related to outdoor play and Land as Teacher. In addition to quantitative survey data, a subset of participants took part in a qualitative Photovoice evaluation activity approximately two months after participating in LOT; these data help validate and expand on quantitative data as well as identify unintended impacts of the LOT program.

#### *Participant Profile*

A total of 254 ECEs were enrolled in LOT during the impact evaluation – 96 participants in Cohort 2 and 158 in Cohort 3. Stratified random sampling helped ensure that pre-existing differences were evenly distributed across cohorts. Participants in the sample were mostly female between the ages of 30-65, with ten or more years of experience working with children. Approximately one quarter identified as Indigenous and three-quarters felt they were “somewhat experienced” outdoors. Participants were recruited from across the province, with approximately two-thirds working in an urban setting. More than 80 per cent worked in group care, and an additional 10 per cent worked in outdoor child care. To limit effects across cohorts, if two or more ECEs from the same workplace were selected for the program, they were placed within the same cohort; 39 per cent of participants in Cohort 2 had a colleague in the program, while 28 per cent participated with a colleague in Cohort 3.

---

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.ecebc.ca/application/files/8917/0188/9087/Impact\\_Report\\_23-10-23.pdf](https://www.ecebc.ca/application/files/8917/0188/9087/Impact_Report_23-10-23.pdf)

## IMPACT EVALUATION KEY FINDINGS



**The most robust impacts, both immediate and short-term, were observed in skills, confidence, and knowledge related to outdoor play and Land as Teacher; however, significant effects were noted in all anticipated areas.**

Below is a summary of the main findings from both the qualitative and quantitative data collection, reflecting outcomes in outdoor programming, health and wellbeing, engagement with Indigenous knowledge, and skills, confidence, and knowledge. We also include a brief section on unanticipated outcomes, which did not fit neatly into any of the pre-determined outcome areas. DiD analysis determines group-level effects in the survey data, which we can confidently attribute to the LOT program as they reflect changes above and beyond those that would have occurred anyway. Significant effects at the level of  $p < 0.1$  are included below.

### ***Current and Desired Outdoor Programming – Immediate but not Sustained Impacts***

Survey data confirmed that participating in LOT increased the proportion of child care program time spent outdoors compared to the control group. This effect was observed immediately after LOT ended, but not two months later. While the overall proportion of time spent outdoors had decreased since baseline (presumably due to the timing of the cohort – from September to December), the decrease was much lower for those in the LOT program, showing the value of LOT even in the fall and winter months. A similar immediate (but not sustained) positive impact of the program was seen in participants improving the physical space of the outdoor environment used in the child care program.

Survey results showed that participants' desired amount of child care program time spent outdoors and motivations/beliefs that support children's outdoor play did not change as a result of LOT. However, these ratings were already quite high at baseline for both cohorts, suggesting a possible ceiling effect and revealing that those who apply to LOT are already highly motivated to support outdoor play and Land as Teacher pedagogy.

Photovoice participants described how LOT inspired them to explore new, natural, open spaces with children in their program. One participant noted the impact of LOT in the winter months through the following Photovoice submission:





### Snow Angel

---

“Before LOT, being outside in the snow with children was often a miserable experience. The children would often be cold and sad or just shuffle around and I wasn’t helping the situation as I would be counting down the minutes until I was inside and warm. Now I find myself looking for new ideas and ways to enjoy outside regardless of how cold or snowy it is. Even something as simple as a snow angel is exciting to a child and it’s my job to facilitate positive outdoor experiences and the LOT course reminded me of that.”

--LOT Cohort 2 Photovoice Participant

---

### *Health and Wellbeing – Immediate but not Sustained Impacts*

LOT participants were significantly more likely than those in the control group to report a strong connection to nature at the end of the program, though this was no longer significant at the two-month follow-up. Similarly, there were immediate positive effects of LOT on feelings of balance physically, emotionally, and spiritually, but not mentally. Photovoice participants described these effects by noting how LOT highlighted the importance of reflection and mindfulness for educators in such busy workplaces. They commented on the need to take care of oneself and one another outside of work so that they could be fully present at work.

The LOT program did not improve workplace satisfaction or measures of burnout. In fact, there was some indication that the LOT program may have contributed to a slight decrease in satisfaction with relationships with colleagues/management and families of children in the program. Photovoice participants shared about the friction that is sometimes felt when trying to do something new, such as introducing unstructured outdoor play to a highly structured environment. While some colleagues and families were more receptive than others, Photovoice participants did not feel that lower satisfaction with relationships was a critical issue or consequence of the LOT program.

## Quiet Reflection with Nature



---

“[Because of LOT, I now understand that] knowledge is rooted in history and memory and requires exploration of one’s own identity. Being in nature grounds us and takes us back to reflect on the Indigenous ways of being. Taking this time to reflect often requires being alone with your own thoughts.”

--LOT Cohort 2 Photovoice Participant

---

## ***Engagement with Indigenous Knowledge – Partial Immediate and Sustained Impacts***

While LOT increased participants’ opportunities to reflect on the unique history and relationships that Indigenous peoples have with the land, there were limited quantitative findings in this area (possibly because validated statistical measures on this topic are scarce). There was one indicator that produced a significant result both immediately and at follow-up: an increase in the recognition of the land-related knowledge that Indigenous Elders and knowledge keepers have.

Qualitatively, Photovoice participants spoke about how the concept of Two-Eyed Seeing helped them to bridge gaps in understanding and perspective. As educators, they felt an important part of their role was to intentionally seek out different worldviews in order to explore and combine perspectives, not to select one or another. Participants also reflected on the wisdom of nature and how the land is healing. For example, one educator described going for a walk around a

playground or sitting on a hill and looking at clouds with a child who needed a break. By practicing being calm and mindful in nature, they helped demonstrate how to self-regulate.

### ***Skills, Confidence, and Knowledge – Robust Immediate and Sustained Impacts***

The clearest and most reliable impacts from the LOT program were observed in participants' self-reported skills, confidence, and knowledge related to outdoor play and Land as Teacher. Skills included ratings such as “*articulating why it is important for children to be outdoors*” and “*providing early care and learning in a variety of outdoor settings*”. All 13 measures of skills were significantly increased immediately after the program ended and 11 were still significantly increased two months later compared to the control group.

Measures of confidence related to outdoor play and Land as Teacher included items such as “*finding ways to give children more opportunities to be outdoors*” and “*creating outdoor learning environments where every child can participate*”. Once again, all were significantly increased immediately after the program ended, and all but two (of eight) were still significantly increased two months later.

Among the four self-reported ratings of knowledge related to facilitating outdoor play and Land as Teacher, all were significantly increased both immediately after the program ended as well as two months later. These ratings included statements such as “*recognizing the land as a teacher*” and “*overall knowledge of the local environment*”.

Photovoice participants described several ways in which LOT improved their skills, confidence, and knowledge. LOT helped participants to articulate what children were learning outdoors and made it easier to demonstrate/document the learning in the same way that they would indoors. At the same time, LOT reiterated the importance of providing children with the freedom to explore and experiment, which can lead to inquiry that can't necessarily be planned. In this way, LOT helped ECEs to see the land as a teacher, reinforcing the value of open, undeveloped, natural public spaces where deep learning and connection happens. The following Photovoice submission highlights the importance of such spaces:



### **Shifting the Focus from Structured Outside Play to the Freedom to Connect with Place**

---

“LOT has invited us to shift our focus from structured outside play for children to the importance of connecting with place in an unstructured and even a risky way. The growing need for policy around children being outdoors and in active, risky play can cause fear and uncertainty as to whether it is safe for children to be in unstructured natural settings. As I have completed LOT my hope is that we encourage early childhood spaces to go outside the boundaries of playgrounds and they are given the support from leadership working collaboratively to provide the freedom children need to develop deeper connections with place in ways that can assess risks and have flexibility.”

--LOT Cohort 2 Photovoice Participant

---

Through LOT, participants developed confidence demonstrating how to respect others, the land, and nature, reinforcing the idea of children as caretakers of the Earth. Participants also discussed the importance of modelling behaviour amongst other educators, too, such as showing new staff at their workplace their expectations and values around outdoor play and Land as Teacher.

### ***Unanticipated Outcomes***

New learnings from the impact analysis prompted further studies about mentorship and completion rates. One such finding was the range of experiences that participants described when contemplating their own decision to pursue becoming a LOT mentor after finishing the program. Examples included participants who decided not to pursue mentorship because they had such positive experiences and felt they would be unable to “fill the shoes” of their mentor, as well as somewhat disappointing experiences that motivated participants to sign up and be the mentor they wish they had. Thus, the specific motivations and rationale that went into these decisions were surprising.

Another unanticipated finding was that completion rates<sup>8</sup> declined from Cohort 1, particularly among Indigenous educators and among those who had a work colleague in the LOT program. Approximately 75% of participants in Cohort 1 completed the program, however this declined to just over 50% of Cohorts 2 and 3.

Although it may be tempting to label lower completion rates as a “negative” outcome, program completion is not equivalent to success. For example, perhaps Indigenous learners or those with colleagues in the program were able to absorb and benefit from the course content despite a lower time commitment (lower documented participation rate) in LOT. From this perspective, these participants may have progressed through the LOT program more efficiently than the participation rate alone would suggest. As these were unanticipated outcomes, our ability to explore them in depth was limited; thus, additional studies were added (see next sections).

Finally, we learned that Photovoice participants highly valued taking part in the evaluation activities. This finding highlighted the importance of reciprocal evaluation methods and reinforced ongoing efforts to center participants’ experiences in the implementation of LOT.

## IMPACT EVALUATION SUMMARY AND LESSONS LEARNED



**Overall, LOT was successful in achieving many of its intended outcomes, particularly improving skills, confidence, and knowledge related to outdoor play and Land as Teacher.**

Unanticipated benefits also arose, reflecting the overall design of the LOT program and how it was implemented. Despite its successes, more work is needed to ensure that LOT addresses the needs of ECL professionals in BC.

Following the high demand for LOT and the high completion rates seen in Cohort 1, the declining number of applicants and lower completion rates observed in Cohorts 2 and 3 were relatively unexpected. More also needs to be done to understand and incorporate the unique experiences and needs of Indigenous ECEs into the LOT program. One of the limitations of the impact analysis was that the evaluation design largely reflected a Western worldview, with indicators mostly derived from research literature and program funders. Although the Theory of Change was co-created with the LOTSC, explicitly incorporating participants’ definitions of success into evaluation metrics would enable us to assess the impact of LOT more fully according to the criteria that matter most to participants.

---

<sup>8</sup> According to LOT’s definition, which was at least 24 of the required 30 hours of the program.

## MENTORSHIP STUDY

### BACKGROUND



**LOT invites program “graduates” to enroll as mentors for future cohorts of the program. The primary role of LOT mentors is to provide support to program participants through regular group meetings.**

The mentorship program is meant to bolster participant learning as well as facilitate skills-building and leadership for LOT program alumni. The purpose of the current evaluation is to better understand the experiences of mentors in the mentorship program, the value of the mentorship portion of LOT, and to learn how program partners can better support mentors in their skills development as group facilitators.

In October 2023, 18 mentors from Cohorts 2 and 3 of the LOT program participated in one of two online focus groups to share their experiences in the mentorship program. Mentors were asked to reflect on their general experiences in the program, including their motivations for joining the mentorship program and what aspects of LOT they perceived was working well/not working well. To better understand their experiences in the mentorship program, mentors were asked to describe their experience leading group discussions and discuss any facilitation skills they believed they had gained. Lastly, mentors were asked about any recommendations they had that would improve the experience of mentors and participants in the LOT program.

### MENTORSHIP STUDY KEY FINDINGS



**Feedback from mentors about the mentorship program and the LOT program was generally positive. Mentors felt that the program content and design was engaging and contributed positively to their leadership skills. Mentors care deeply about the program and were excited to provide input.**

In many cases, it was not possible to distinguish between effects of the mentorship program specifically compared to the LOT program broadly. The results are summarized here based on overall experiences shared by mentors.

## ***Mentors' Experiences in the LOT Program***

Mentors generally expressed that the mentorship program provided a welcome opportunity to further explore the LOT content that had been introduced to them as participants. At the heart of this deepened experience with the content was the sense of connection that mentorship fostered. Building connections with other ECEs emerged as a core benefit of the LOT mentorship program. As one mentor described,

---

*"I loved the content of the program, but I found that my favourite part was the community... 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?' Like, it was just really valuable in that way."*

– LOT mentor

---

Mentors described the value of peer mentoring, knowledge sharing, and learning with and from one another. Integrating a diverse set of educators into small groups facilitated positive learning opportunities and bolstered mentors' confidence.

Although the course content was noted as "more intensive" than some mentors were expecting, materials related to Indigenous knowledge specifically were generally perceived as needing strengthening. Some mentors described a dearth of resources related to incorporating Indigenous perspectives into outdoor practices. Further, some aspects of the mentor training in particular left mentors feeling unprepared. For example, they noted a lack of training related to specific facilitation techniques they could use in their groups, as well as resources to help them quickly review module content to prepare for group meetings.

Nonetheless, many mentors described a fairly seamless transition from participant to mentor, and expressed gratitude for having mentor-facilitators available as further supports throughout their time as mentors. However, mentors were sometimes frustrated by the lack of communication and/or slow response from LOT administrators. They generally agreed that the administrative aspects of mentorship were more than they had initially anticipated and were not always clearly communicated.

One theme that contributed to a negative experience as a mentor related to participant withdrawals. Some mentors expressed concern that participants who exited the program early may have done so because they felt insufficiently supported by their mentor, which sometimes resulted in uncertainty regarding their facilitation skills, as described in this quote:

---

*“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

---

A few mentors also expressed frustration at seeing their discussion group sizes shrink with participant withdrawal from the program, explaining that small or inconsistent discussion groups often made facilitation more difficult.

A final challenge that was noted by mentors related to navigating the Hub to access LOT modules, which was noted as not user-friendly or accessible for mentors and participants alike.

### ***Takeaway Skills and Knowledge Gained as a Mentor***

Mentors shared a variety of leadership and facilitation skills gained as a result of their training and, more commonly, experience leading small group sessions. Examples included learning to be comfortable with silence in conversations, allowing the group to go “off-track” to open up discussions, and being receptive to participant feedback.

Mentors demonstrated the importance of reflection and continuous learning in order to create “safe spaces” in which every participant felt welcome. They described encouraging group members to participate in the ways they felt most comfortable, and welcomed those who had not completed the assigned modules or readings prior to the meeting. One mentor described a key lesson they learned about accommodating different learning styles as follows:

---

*“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

---



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.

### ***Mentors' Recommendations for Improvement to the LOT Program***

Four main requests emerged from mentors' feedback regarding improvements to LOT. The first was to improve communication and expectations for both participants and mentors. For participants, this could include making the program requirements explicit so that participants can appropriately manage expectations and workload; for mentors this could include more communication about participant progress, including reasons for withdrawal when possible, as well as clear expectations regarding administrative duties.

Another request was to have more guidance on how to present Indigenous knowledge, particularly for mentors who did not have personal experience to draw from. 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

---

Thirdly, mentors recommended improving the ease of navigation regarding technology broadly and the Early Years Hub in particular. Some wondered if a more user-friendly platform was available, while others suggested improvements to the current platform such as better mobile compatibility and enabling voice or video responses rather than text contributions to discussion forums.

Finally, mentors emphasized the importance of having adequate lead time before their first small group meeting, in which they could check in with participants and help them troubleshoot aforementioned tech challenges. 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 to feel they had fallen behind.

## MENTORSHIP STUDY SUMMARY AND LESSONS LEARNED



**The care and dedication to supporting peer learning displayed by mentors demonstrates their immense value to the LOT program. Their expertise and determination contribute to LOT’s success in an immeasurable way.**

Despite their resourcefulness, there are ways to improve the mentor experience to ensure their continued success. Supporting mentors with better resources related to their roles and expectations, specific content/facilitation knowledge, and information related to participant withdrawals emerged as key findings in this study. With regard to participant withdrawals, assuring mentors that attrition is a normal part of program delivery may help alleviate feelings of disappointment from mentors, and providing specific supports for how to overcome a shrinking group size could assist in reducing the negative impacts on the remaining group. Finally, encouraging mentors to adopt a strengths-based view of program success is expected to benefit mentors and participants alike, as described in more detail in the next section.

## COMPLETION STUDY

### BACKGROUND



Like many professional development programs, LOT encounters participants who exit the program without completing it. It can sometimes be difficult to determine the reasons for participants exiting the program in this manner.

Program partners and mentors have expressed interest in learning more about why participants exit the program early, including better understanding the internal factors (i.e., related to the LOT program itself) and external factors (e.g., changes in personal life, career changes) that can lead to program attrition. Understanding these factors could prove useful for program developers who wish to support participant progression through the program, as well as updating mentor expectations so they are aware of typical barriers that participants encounter.

Two collection methods were used during this study: an online focus group with participants from cohort 4 (n = 3), and an online survey of participants from cohorts 2 and 3 (n = 9). Participants in both the focus group and survey were asked to reflect on their motivations for joining the LOT program, why they ultimately exited the program, and what recommendations (if any) they had to improve the program. Examining participant motivations allows us to better understand what they had hoped to accomplish by joining LOT and contextualize their departure from the program.

### *Strengths-Based Approach*

**This approach requires a critical examination of whose definition of success is being reflected and prioritized and does not assume that completing the LOT program is the best course of action for any individual participant.**

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 and highlighting individual experiences in isolation may elicit feelings of shame or failure; thus, we approached this study with a strengths-based orientation. By doing so, we recognize that withdrawing from the LOT program was likely reflective of interacting individual, environmental, and historical factors, rather than individual factors in isolation<sup>9</sup>.

---

<sup>9</sup> FNIGC, 2020

## COMPLETION STUDY KEY FINDINGS



Despite exiting the program early, former participants expressed a high level of interest in the program content and agreed they would like to participate again in the future.

### *Motivations for Joining*

The program's focus on outdoor education and Land as Teacher was noted as the primary motivating interest to join LOT. Former participants described wanting to gain more tips and advice about how to integrate outdoor play and Indigenous teachings into their practice. The opportunity to connect with other ECEs also played a factor in former participants' decision to join LOT. When probed about the importance of professional development hours, former participants explained that the hours and certification associated with LOT were of little importance in their decision to enroll. Some reported a lack of awareness of the available hours, and other described knowing about the hours but stated they "would have done [the program] anyways".

### *Reasons for Leaving*

Changes in personal circumstances (e.g., family health, employment changes) were nearly unanimously the main reasons that participants gave for exiting the program early. Former participants discussed unforeseeable changes in work schedules or personal situations that prevented them from continuing with such an intensive program. One participant described:

---

*"...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 [LOT], unfortunately."*

– LOT participant

---

Some participants reported that the workload associated with the program proved to be more than initially anticipated. This likely interacted with the changes in personal circumstances noted above – for example, former participants suggested that making the required homework more "flexible" and "less of a time commitment" may have enabled them to continue in LOT despite their life changes.

Other participants reported that they felt disconnected from their discussion groups, though it is not clear that this was ultimately the catalyst that prompted them to exit the program. One participant described the lack of fit with the program/group:

---

*“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 [because I already believe this].”*

– LOT participant

---

Finally, one former participant pushed back on the notion that they did not complete LOT, stating that they “finished the program and got a certificate”. While this participant had completed about half of the possible professional development hours, their experience provides a necessary reminder to consider whose perspectives and worldviews are being prioritized when determining policies, definitions, and measurements. Though program administrators may apply a label of “non-completion” to a participant, ours is just one of many possible definitions of course completion or success in LOT.

## COMPLETION STUDY SUMMARY AND LESSONS LEARNED



**Participants in this study typically identified multiple, interacting factors that contributed to withdrawal from LOT. These findings highlight the value of strengths-based orientations, flexibility, and participant-defined success.**

Non-completion was often the result of unpredictable and uncontrollable life circumstances, exacerbated by inflexible program design, underinvestment in Early Care and Learning professionals’ working conditions (such as paid time off for professional development), and broader social issues (such as the uneven burden of unpaid domestic care).

As such, a review of the LOT program’s success should avoid putting emphasis on program completion rates, as this may not be a strong indicator of the overall value of the program or reflect participants’ experiences. Instead, it may be prudent to consider what factors are important to participants’ learning and whether they feel they have successfully achieved their goals of participating in the program.

## CONCLUSIONS



The LOT program was originally conceived in response to COVID-19, to pilot, test and scale an innovative approach to skills training that would support economic recovery and help ECEs in the sector maintain their livelihoods.

Given the focus on supporting professional development in the essential ECL sector, this project contributes to economic recovery by ensuring training opportunities for ECEs, so that they can maintain their jobs, and hence parents of young children can still work. As this report has shown, LOT contributed to positive change beyond economic recovery as well – participants have described a number of meaningful outcomes, including renewed motivation to stay in the ECL field, deepening commitment to Truth and Reconciliation, and stronger connections to nature.

The development of LOT also led to the establishment of a unique values based, reciprocal partnership between three nonprofit organizations in the design, delivery and evaluation of LOT. Through all phases of the project, we kept coming back to the following lessons learned:

- **A strengths-based approach** to program delivery and evaluation is essential. Partially completing LOT does not necessarily represent a negative outcome for the individual participant – to the extent that the participant had a choice, it could reflect good judgement, healthy boundary setting, and/or efficiency of moving through the program.
  - Further, significant group effects of the LOT program were found in the impact analysis, suggesting that completion is not necessarily required to experience positive impacts. Many participants who didn't complete the program still received credit for partial professional development hours.
- **Relationships** are key! They became one of the most important outcomes for engaged participants (as reported by mentors) and were foundational to how the partners and LOTSC worked together.
  - Relationships require time to develop. This reflects ongoing learning for us as partners as well as with respect to program delivery (via the importance of giving participants time to get on the Hub, meet their group and mentor, etc). It can be difficult to balance long lead-times with a flexible and responsive approach to program delivery and evaluation.
- Importance of **effective communication**, clear expectations, and transparency.
  - This was probably the biggest piece of feedback we heard in all the studies – certainly prominently in implementation, mentorship, and completion studies. As

the program grew, the challenge shifted from communicating *more* to communicating *effectively*, with multiple moving pieces and interested parties becoming increasingly invested in LOT.

- This is also important for us as partners and LOTSC – see relationships above. With the LOT program moving into an operational, sustainability phase, we are learning the best ways to be both effective and efficient in our communications with each other, especially in regard to decisions that involve all three partners.
- Importance of perspective-taking and **examining assumptions** through a Two-Eyed Seeing lens. As noted throughout this report, Indigenous cultural teachings were relevant to content development, instrument development, program delivery, and project governance.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS



**During the first three years of LOT, evidence was generated demonstrating its effectiveness in multiple dimensions.**

Over the next three years, there is opportunity to build on the findings to date, implementing some of the recommendations generated by the previous studies. These include:

- Incorporate learners into program design and delivery to understand what different educators want and need from a land-based professional development program (or if they want one at all). Review outcome measures to include participant definitions of success.
- Expand eligibility criteria to other ECL professionals, such as licensing officers and Early Childhood Educator Assistants (ECEAs) and potentially those working in hitherto ineligible workplaces such as parent participation programs (e.g., StrongStartBC).
- Test adapted delivery model with flexible “catch up” weeks for participants, implemented in Cohort 4 but not yet evaluated.
- Update mentor program content with a new module on Indigenous teachings.

We look forward to continuing to learn together, with good hearts and minds.

---

*“I used to take for granted where I live. Going through the LOT program taught me to pause and reflect and gave me fresh eyes when it comes to my surroundings and how much there is to learn from them and how to acknowledge how lucky I am to live on this land.”*

-LOT Cohort 2 Participant

---

## REFERENCES

Dankiw KA, Tsiros MD, Baldock KL, 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>

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.

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>

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](https://lawson.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/YE_Systematic_Review_HEAL.pdf)

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.

Wang, C., & Burris, M. A. (1997). Photovoice: Concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment. *Health education & behavior*, 24(3), 369-387.



OTTAWA • VANCOUVER • CALGARY • HAMILTON • MONTREAL

REGINA • ST. JOHN'S • TORONTO • WINNIPEG