

Project Insights Report

# Learning Outside Together: Incorporating Traditional Wisdom and Promising Practices to Futureproof Childcare Programs



**PARTNERS**

ECEBC – Early  
Childhood Educators of  
British Columbia



**LOCATIONS**

British Columbia



**INVESTMENT**

\$843,554



**PUBLISHED**

October 2024



**CONTRIBUTORS**

Steve Richter,  
*Senior Bilingual Policy  
Analyst*

## Executive Summary

During the COVID-19 pandemic, indoor activities were often responsible for the spread of the virus. This necessitated different approaches to keep early childhood educators (ECE) and children safe, including spending more time outdoors. Outdoor learning has been shown to be beneficial to child development, improving mental, social and emotional health outcomes. In this project, Early Childhood Educators of British Columbia (ECEBC) sought to mitigate the risk of COVID-19, all the while promoting newer types of outdoor learning that specifically blended traditional Indigenous and Western knowledge systems.

The program successfully trained over 300 ECEs in outdoor learning skills and Indigenous ways of knowing, creating a unique and valuable experience for the children. Moreover, it provided an immediate pathway for graduates of the program to become mentors for the newer cohorts, leading to even more skills development. The program has since been funded for an additional three years by the British Columbia government. Successful initiatives like this show how important outdoor learning and Indigenous knowledge are to the field of early childhood education, and policy-makers should consider how this type of programming can be brought into the licensing system.

### KEY INSIGHTS

1

Interest in doing early childhood education programs outdoors is high: the program initially had over 900 applications but only 80 spots available.

- 2 Acquisition of tangible skills and Indigenous knowledge is sustained months after completion of the program.
- 3 The program successfully turned over 30 ECE participants into mentors for later cohorts.

## ▶ The Issue

There was a pressing need for early care and learning (ECL) centres to continue operating safely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Operating outdoors presented a unique opportunity to stay open, but it also leveraged the research that demonstrates a positive link between access to nature / land-based education with positive child development and well-being.

Currently, British Columbia does not license early childhood education in outdoor settings, making outdoor facilities unregulated. Ultimately, this means that anyone can open such a program, regardless of qualifications, and that outdoor education and land-based education is mostly absent from educational curricula for early childhood education centres.



## What We Investigated

The partnership between ECEBC and BC Aboriginal Child Care Society intended to provide an upskilling and training program for ECEs, blending Western and Indigenous knowledge into a program that promotes outdoor learning. Because the program was launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, the 10 courses were offered online over a span of three months, with weekly reading and interactive materials and meetings guided by other educators and peer mentors.

In providing this training to both ECEs and mentors, the program sought to answer the following questions:

- Could Indigenous and Western knowledge be combined?
- Was the online model an effective format for professional development?
- Would skills be developed from this model? If so, which ones?
- Were sufficient numbers of professionals interested in becoming peer mentors for the following cohort?

Indigenous Traditional Knowledge and wisdom was incorporated into the course content, covering issues such as sustainability and honouring the land and Traditional Territories. The courses were 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 contained a mixture of learning materials, including narrative interviews, written materials and reflection exercises.

Each participant was connected with a mentor and a small learning group of approximately seven other participants who shared the same mentor. Mentors facilitated learning circles with their small groups of participants to further explore the course content and support one another in their learning journeys. Contact with mentors and other participants mostly took place virtually. With the exception of the first cohort, mentors were recruited from previous-cohort participants who had completed the program.

The project was evaluated using a mixed-methods approach, comprising both a survey and focus groups for program graduates. Additionally, participants who left the program before graduation were asked to complete a follow-up survey. The goal of the survey was to better understand why those ECEs chose to leave, with the ultimate goal being that the feedback would enhance the program for future cohorts.

Graduates of the program who were interested in becoming mentors went through additional training before officially stepping into the mentorship role, and this group was asked to join an additional focus group to evaluate their experiences as mentors.

## What We're Learning

Program coordinators learned a great deal about the effectiveness of outdoor learning in general, as well as skills acquisition in both the ECEs and mentors.

### **ECEs acquired and retained significant Indigenous knowledge**

Across all cohorts, ECEs gained knowledge on Indigenous ways of viewing the land and on the role played by Indigenous Elders and knowledge keepers. Additionally, concepts like “Two-Eyed Seeing” assisted ECEs in bridging gaps in their own understanding of their profession and the world around them. These findings were true shortly after completion of the program, as well as two months after. This suggests that the teachings had a lasting impact on the ECEs and that the ECEs desired to incorporate this knowledge into their daily professional or personal lives.

### **Technical skills and knowledge in outdoor play lead to the development of soft skills to support success in mentor roles**

These include being able to articulate why outdoor education is important and being able to provide early childhood education outdoors.

All 13 measures of skills had increased for participants. What is more, 11 out of 13 skills were still higher two months after completing the program. Acquiring these skills proved to be essential for the confidence that ECEs needed to be able to administer outdoor education in an environment where it is still not regulated.

### **Mentors gain invaluable soft skills that set them up for future success**

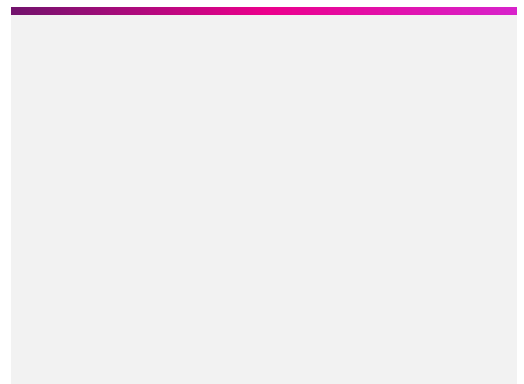
The mentorship element of the program transitioned successful graduates into mentorship roles. The mentors guided future cohorts through the program alongside the program facilitators. This led the mentors to acquire more knowledge of the program, and to see how the first cohort was improved upon after the evaluation. It also led them to acquire valuable skills for their present and future professional lives. In particular, mentors highlighted their skill development in being comfortable as leaders, facilitating group discussions and knowing how to accommodate different learning styles within a large group.

### **While mentors had positive experiences in their roles, more support is required**

In particular, many mentors were not aware of the administrative tasks that awaited them when transitioning into these roles. In addition to this, the online portal for recording attendance information and participant feedback was difficult for many mentors to navigate. Additional training could alleviate these burdens and better prepare mentors before each session. Lastly, while leadership and facilitation skills were developed, many mentors felt that these were acquired through trial and error rather than by design. Future cohorts should look to improve upon this, making the acquisition of these skills more intentional.

## **Why It Matters**

The learnings from this project are valuable to program managers and policy-makers that are seeking to promote more ways of recognizing the value that Indigenous knowledge has while also improving the early childhood education sector.





While the program was largely successful, the number of ECEs that it could have trained would have been substantially higher had it been able to quickly scale up and accommodate them. The first cohort had 946 applications for 39 initial spots. While the space allotted was increased to 80, this highlights a problem that several Future Skills Centre-funded projects have had: demand significantly outpacing capacity. Policy-makers should consider a way to make funding agreements flexible if programs show that a certain demand threshold has been met. In this way, funded organizations could unlock an additional percentage of their overall funding agreement to better meet their program's demand and the needs of their community.

This program also showed that there is high demand from ECEs for outdoor learning. At present, any outdoor learning programs are not regulated by the Government of British Columbia, and as such, the ECEs are not officially licensed to provide these services. Of course, partnerships like this one, between ECEBC and BC Aboriginal Child Care Society, prepare ECEs to give this programming safely, but the government should take action to officially recognize and regulate this type of learning.



### **State of Skills: Effective Employer Engagement in Skills Development: From Rhetoric to Solutions**

Supporting employers in overcoming structural barriers to training investment is key to addressing labour and skill shortages.

[Read Thematic Report](#)

The program's incorporation of Indigenous knowledge and the ECEs' retention of this knowledge over the course of the program and months after were among this program's strengths. The link between outdoor learning and Indigenous teachings was clearly established, and policy-makers should encourage educational programs to partner with Indigenous organizations to propose other ways of incorporating these knowledge systems into the education sector.

## **► What's Next**

ECEBC continues to host the Learning Outside Together program after receiving three years of funding from the Government of British Columbia. The project is also developing additional course content and impact stories from program participants. The project has also received significant interest from other jurisdictions that are interested in developing something similar.

Have questions about our work? Do you need access to a report in English or French? Please contact [communications@fsc-ccf.ca](mailto:communications@fsc-ccf.ca).

### How to Cite This Report

Richter, S. (2024). Project Insights Report: Learning outside together: Incorporating traditional wisdom and promising practices to futureproof child care programs, Early Childhood Educators of British Columbia. Toronto: Future Skills Centre. <https://fsc-ccf.ca/projects/learning-outside/>

Funded by the  
Government of Canada's  
Future Skills Program



Learning Outside Together: Incorporating Traditional Wisdom and Promising Practices to Futureproof Childcare Programs is funded by the Government of Canada's Future Skills Program. The opinions and interpretations in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Government of Canada.

© Copyright 2025 – Future Skills Centre / Centre des Compétences futures