

Roadmap

to Universal Child Care in Ontario

Program Profile 2

Learning Enrichment Foundation

August 2023

*COALITION ONTARIENNE POUR
de meilleurs services
éducatifs à l'enfance*



Roadmap to Universal Child Care in Ontario. Program Profile 2: Learning Enrichment Foundation

August 2023

Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario: www.aeceo.ca

Ontario Coalition for Better Child Care: www.childcareontario.org

Written by: Nicola Maguire, Director of Research and Pedagogical Leadership, Learning Enrichment Foundation

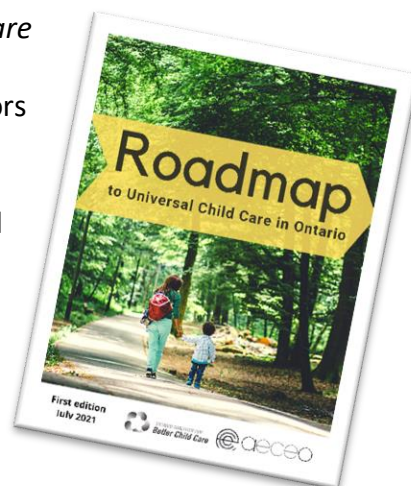
Series editors: Alana Powell & Carolyn Ferns

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INTRODUCTION

In July 2021, the first edition of the *Roadmap to Universal Child Care in Ontario* was released by the Ontario Coalition for Better Childcare (OCBCC) and the Association of Early Childhood Educators Ontario (AECEO). The *Roadmap* set out our vision and shared our path forward but did not delve deeply into each area of transformation needed. As we develop, and to inform, the second edition of the *Roadmap*, we are releasing policy briefs that discuss specific issues in more detail, and program profiles highlighting innovative practices and programs in Ontario.



In this Program Profile we join the Learning Enrichment Foundation on their journey of learning with and from Indigenous Peoples and allies. We explore their work to provide outdoor play experiences that support relationships with the natural world in an urban setting, including their implementation of a seasonal pedagogy approach and their collaboration on the research project *Designing and Implementing Environmental Inquiry Strategies in Early Years Programs*.

LEARNING ENRICHMENT FOUNDATION

PROGRAM INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

The Learning Enrichment Foundation (LEF) is a social enterprise, comprising multiple initiatives that build on the strength and growth of local communities. Our work focuses primarily in and around the North-West quadrant of Toronto and the Mount Dennis community. While there are several departments across LEF that facilitate our work, the organization operates with much collaboration and integration of services. In addition to operating 24 not-for-profit licensed child care centres, LEF also offers language, settlement, and employment services. With a tenacious drive, we hold onto the core values of humility, empowerment, belonging, and enterprising spirit. LEF is a unique organization, remaining open to new challenges and opportunities for the communities we work in and with. A reflective approach to our values and culture has led us to determine four key priorities:

1. Commit to a journey of learning from and with Indigenous Peoples;
2. Understand the importance of, and our role in, Placemaking in a tumultuous world;
3. Share our story and knowledge freely with others;
4. Relentlessly reflect on how our actions support the building of a more resilient, people focused, economy.

It is with the value of empowerment in mind that LEF commits to decent work conditions for all. Empowerment leads to a sense of belonging, and we want to ensure all employees experience feelings of connection across all areas of LEF.

We understand the impact of recognition for the professional work of our employees, not only for themselves but for the sector as a whole. LEF offers salaries that align with or above market rates because we value our employees and the work they do. Flexible benefit options include a defined benefit pension, core health and dental, and health care spending accounts to support the varying needs of our employees and their families. Paid vacation and personal emergency days are available for full-time and part-time employees, as well as personal days to ensure people can take time away to rejuvenate and maintain/improve their health. LEF also celebrates and rewards years of service in five-year increments. We aim to grow and work together, as we each make significant contributions and impact throughout our careers with LEF

IDEAS AND APPROACH

For quite some time now, LEF has been strongly invested in providing children outdoor play experiences that foster meaningful relationships with the natural world and cultivate the skills required to become resilient beings. This focus extends across our organization, as illustrated in our key priorities and the deep consideration given to the impact of our actions.

In the Children & Families department of LEF, this work began within the confines of our urban setting. With many of our child care centres located in schools, the challenges of shared spaces and asphalt playgrounds are an everyday reality that require creative solutions. Introducing loose parts and natural materials to our playgrounds offered children flexible materials and created opportunities for natural problem-solving to occur. Adding high quality children's outerwear for both cold and wet weather was another approach that led to great success in getting children outdoors for extended periods of time. Clothing for all types of weather is just as essential to children's play experiences as a set of blocks, and we consider these items to be required materials for our programs.

As part of this commitment, George Brown College, The Learning Enrichment Foundation, Toronto Early Learning and Child Care Services, The Jackman Institute of Child Study, and Natural Curiosity are involved in the research project *Designing and Implementing Environmental Inquiry Strategies in Early Years Programs*. This three-year study began in 2020, with Dr. Monica McGlynn-Stewart as the Principal Investigator, and is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). The project is focused on nature-based learning, including Indigenous perspectives on learning with and from the land, for preschool children in urban child care programs in the Greater Toronto Area.

The objectives of this project are to examine educators' perspectives and practices with respect to nature-based learning with young children and identify how children learn with and from nature. The project also aims to analyze the impact of environmental inquiry on young children's overall well-being and holistic development and to develop a framework and resources to support early years educators as they create environmental inquiry programs. Knowledge dissemination includes workshops, presentations and publications for both local and national audiences across the early years and environmental education sectors.

For LEF, this study is focused in three of our programs, yet the learning and knowledge gained is shared throughout all our child care programs. This includes sharing resources with educators and families to enable further learning and exploration. Regular opportunities for educators and supervisors to discuss and share the experiences taking place at each of their centres also ensures the knowledge gained is being put into practice and will be sustained in our programs when this study comes to an end. As part of this research project, we introduced and learned more about nature and land-based approaches to early childhood education and came to understand the need to include the perspectives of the First Peoples of this Land in this work. In conjunction, both the research project team and LEF began to learn more about Indigenous Perspectives in this context, with guidance from First Nations community members.

Initially, this journey began at LEF in our Children & Families department and can be most recognized through our work with Dr. Hopi Martin Waabizheshi Oshkaabewis (Ojibwe Marten



Clan Sacred Helper), guided by Dr. Gokoomis (Grandmother) Jacque(line) Lavallée Ed.D and her family's traditional practices from the Eastern Shore of Georgian Bay. This work has included the implementation of a Seasonal Pedagogy (Birth, Movement, Relationships, Passing) that came out of Dr. Hopi Martin's research with Dr. Gokoomis (Grandmother) Jacque called Listening to Land as Teacher in Early Childhood Education (2021) where this Ojibwe, land-based pedagogy was found to be an ethical way for all Peoples/Nations to ethically engage with Traditional Ojibwe Knowledge with children.

We soon realized the many synergies between these Ojibwe Teachings and our own organizational culture and priorities. It was clear this work could not exist only in the Children & Families department but must extend across the organization. It has often been said that LEF is about relationships, and as we began to learn what it means to walk with First Nations, we recognized that the focus on relationships and coming from a place of kindness are elements that not only reflected our own work, but just felt right. That is not to say this has been an easy path. It has, and continues to be, a complex learning experience for all of us. Each department and individual is at their own place in this process with an understanding that the path and destination may not always be clear. There is a necessity for open and honest dialogue for this to work; that is not always easy to do in work settings, where colonial structures of hierarchical power are historically prevalent. This is hard work, and we are grateful for both the courage and willingness to be vulnerable that has brought each of us here.

In prioritizing our work with Indigenous Peoples, we have, and will continue to take on new challenges and bring opportunities to the communities in which we interact. LEF started this journey to connect children to the outdoors and soon learned how it connected to the need to understand and respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action (2015). As we have gained knowledge about the process of reconciliation and decolonization, we have also been learning some Ojibwe protocols and customs. As one of the First Peoples of the Land on which we operate, we committed to including Ojibwe teachings in our pedagogical approach. This is not done at the exclusion of other cultures; it is how we honour the traditional caretakers of this Land.

As an organization, LEF is rich in diversity and embraces the traditions and rich history of many cultures in our daily experiences and practice. In this way, we aim to empower our Educators to create a sense of belonging and placemaking that reflects the staff, children and families in the child care centre and the local community, while giving back and acknowledging those who came first.

Bringing Educators, children, and families into deeper relationships with the Land comes with well documented benefits, including improved mental and physical health. With the onset of COVID-19, our introduction of this work was quickly expedited as we sought ways to reduce the

impact of the pandemic. With guidance from Dr Hopi Martin and Dr Gokoomis Jacqueline Lavallee, we began introducing the Seasonal Pedagogy at some of our child care centres. We also introduced Sharing Circles for Educators, Supervisors, and our Senior Team to create space for learning and asking questions. The simple protocol of sharing who we are, where we are from, and what we are grateful for when introducing ourselves quickly became a powerful Teaching for all of us and has been introduced to varying degrees across the organization.

In the Children & Families department, taking time to collectively learn about ourselves and each other has created space for a level of intimacy not typically seen in work settings. We have learned together about our family histories and in sharing our stories, have developed bonds that translate into more open and trusting work relationships.

In child care centres this protocol has become a favourite ritual amongst the children, with them excitedly sharing their names and what they love. As Educators learned about All My Relations, the concepts of reciprocal relationships with Mother Earth and only taking what you need have become embedded in daily practice. Children will ask a tree for permission before collecting a pinecone from the ground and leave gifts or sing a song in return. Educators use the Seasonal Pedagogy as a guide to reflect upon and document experiences they observe and have with the children. This kind and slower approach to learning brings a sense of calm to a sector that is



typically fast paced and often comes with daily changes. Sharing these stories with families, through digital documentation, allows for further community impact. Families respond with their own stories of spending more time outdoors or express their gratitude for the experiences their children are having.

SUPPORTS AND BARRIERS

Embracing this approach has required considerable work at all levels. It would be fair to say we have all engaged in an ‘un-learning’ of some sort. For some, this has included deep reflection on the meaning of ‘spirit’ and how that relates to this work. While colonial views may consider spirit in relation to religion, we have learned that for Indigenous Peoples spirit is everywhere. Drawing on this, we have learned the importance for individuals to make sense of how they are responding to and engaging with learnings that may be new to them, before drawing any parallels to Indigenous Knowledge or practices.

For Educators, this work has also included a journey of reflecting upon the linear and developmental approaches that typically dominated their pre-service education. We have adopted a slow and steady approach to challenging our own thinking and the deeply embedded approaches that exist in our sector. It was suggested by our Indigenous partners that building several small communities of practice within our department could be one approach to enable this work in the context of our child care centres. These Sharing Circles offer time for much needed discussion, questioning, and reflection as we learn together about implementing this pedagogical approach. Bi-weekly Sharing Circles led by Dr Hopi Martin are also offered to ensure there are continuous opportunities to learn and ask questions to help deepen our growing understanding. In addition to this, we aim to share and include our families in this process. Family and community events organized with local Indigenous groups provide opportunities to engage first-hand as they learn more about the traditions and protocols of the First Peoples of this land.

The highly regulated nature of our sector can lead to some challenges in this work. Licensed child care is regulated with good reason and our aim is not to put children at risk. However, the impact of working within such structures can create tension for Educators as they consider what they would like to do and what they can do. In the City of Toronto, Assessment for Quality Improvement (AQI), a quality measurement tool used by licensing inspectors, adds an additional layer to the regulations Educators and Operators must follow. LEF has sought out ways to address some of the challenges that working in tension with regulations may bring, and we have embraced the opportunity to consult with the city in this regard. At LEF, Educators are equipped and encouraged to respectfully share their expertise and reasons behind pedagogical decisions with licensing inspectors. Continued work in this vein, with regulatory bodies consulting

operators and Educators, could go a long way to foster a more open and collaborative process, and in turn, further empower Educators in working towards a stronger system.

CONNECTION TO THE ROADMAP

MOVING ONTARIO'S CHILD CARE SYSTEM FORWARD

LEF's number one strategic priority is to commit to a journey of learning from and with Indigenous Peoples. This not only reflects our organizational direction, but is a direct response to the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action, specifically #12 which calls for federal, provincial, territorial and Aboriginal governments to develop culturally appropriate early childhood education programs. Licensed child care programs are used by a variety of families, including Indigenous families. Item #63 calls for the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada to maintain an annual commitment to Indigenous education issues, including building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect. At LEF, we have embraced this approach not just as a response to the TRC, but as a step to make amends for the harms brought against First Nations, Inuit, and Metis people and to continue to build relationships with these communities. Beginning this work with our youngest citizens positions children as important and capable contributors of society who will carry this knowledge with them across their lifespan. Equipping Educators to engage in this work ensures there is a plan for sustaining the changes that we are seeing. Both approaches together set a strong foundation for building resilient communities, something that should be at the core of any child care system.

SCALING UP

Scaling up this work is a challenge that LEF is acutely aware of and currently working through. As an organization, we are grateful for collaboration with Indigenous partners, and we strive to continue widening the Circle as a means to extend this work. Ensuring this work is done in a respectful and thoughtful manner takes considerable resources – in both finances and time.

ALIGNMENT WITH THE ROADMAP'S POLICY INTERVENTIONS

There are many connections to the Roadmap's policy interventions. Intervention # 1 calls for an amendment to the CCEYA to address children's right to have access to child care that is inclusive and culturally safe. Taken together with intervention #2 which calls for the creation of a task force to embed anti-racism and anti-oppressive frameworks and pedagogy and centre Indigenous knowledge across the ELCC system, the work LEF is doing seems poised to respond to these policy interventions. While LEF is not an Indigenous organization, we have partnered with folks from the many urban Indigenous communities here in Tkaronto (Toronto) and actively seek to widen this Circle. We understand the vast amount of work to be done and recognize this responsibility does not rest with the First Peoples of this land.

As we have embraced Ojibwe Anishinaabe protocols and practices in our programs connections to interventions #14 and #16 that could help to retain staff and stabilize the child care system have been evident. As Educators become more familiar with Indigenous ways of knowing and include them in their practice, we have seen improved communication and teamwork that has translated into improved morale and job satisfaction. Simply expressing gratitude and guiding children to do the same has been incredibly impactful, as one example. Through this work, we have also learned to follow a specific protocol when introducing ourselves, as a form of land acknowledgement. We now begin our meetings with introductions where we say who we are, where we are from, where are ancestors are from, and where our heart is. The impact for teams has been noticeably significant. Learning these details about colleagues creates space to make connections, ask questions, and learn more about each other. Beginning in this way also brings an element of kindness and understanding that may not always exist in a typical workplace meeting. Given the known stressors impacting the child care sector, and existing well before the pandemic, we feel this is significant and deserving of attention.

In alignment with the *Roadmap*, LEF maintains a strong focus on workforce strategies to ensure we are able to offer quality child care programs. As an organization, LEF offers decent work conditions for all employees. We recognize that Educators have not always been treated equitably with others doing similar work in similar sectors. By offering salaries that align with or are above market rates we aim to let our employees know we value them and the work they do.



Consulting with employees and responding to their feedback ensures all voices are included in decision making. An employee survey regarding benefit packages led us to change our benefit provider and offer more flexible benefit options for all. LEF employees now appreciate a defined benefit pension (optional for part-time employees), core health and dental with the option to enhance, and flexible health care spending accounts to support the varying needs of our employees and their families. Additionally, all employees receive paid vacation and personal emergency days, as well as personal days to ensure everyone can take time away from work to rejuvenate and maintain/improve their health.

The Learning Enrichment Foundation also creates spaces to support strong pedagogical practice through paid professional learning. Partnering with trusted and known practitioners to develop long-term professional learning strategies sets us up for successful growth to be sustained over time. Creating Communities of Practice for our Educators ensures they are empowered to further reflect and refine their thinking and offers a space for everyone to share and learn from each other. LEF maintains these decent work standards with the humility to continue to learn from and with others.