

Evaluation of the Outdoor Ways of Learning and Sharing (OWLS) Pilot Program at the Nipissing-Parry Sound Catholic District School Board

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BACKGROUND

From November 2021 to January 2022, the Nipissing-Parry Sound Catholic District School Board (NPSC) collaborated with the Canadian Ecology Centre (CEC) and the North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit (Health Unit) to implement the Outdoor Ways of Learning and Sharing (OWLS) pilot program in select primary and intermediate classrooms.

The OWLS pilot program offered curriculum-linked outdoor learning experiences to students and provided professional development for educators. This program aimed to:

- Benefit student learning, social and emotional development, and appreciation for the environment
- Build confidence, competence, and intent among school staff to teach the Ontario elementary curriculum in outdoor settings

PROGRAM AT A GLANCE

- Two schools participated in the OWLS pilot program, including four classes (three Early Learning-Kindergarten [ELK] classes and one 7/8 class), four classroom teachers, three designated early childhood educators (DECEs), two educational assistants (EAs), one vice principal, and 72 students.
- The style and number of learning experiences differed for each participating class based on educator preference, feasibility, and scheduling (impacted by weather and the COVID-19 pandemic).
- One ELK class participated in six OWLS sessions, two ELK classes participated in one OWLS session, and the 7/8 class participated in four OWLS sessions.
- Classes with four or more sessions participated in the OWLS mentorship program, which consisted of co-planning, co-teaching, and co-reflecting cycles between the classroom educator and a CEC facilitator.
- Classes with one session participated in the OWLS outreach program, in which a CEC facilitator delivered the session and modeled outdoor ways of learning.
- Each learning experience was approximately 1-2 hours long.
- The NPSC Experiential Learning Special Assignment Teacher (SAT) assisted with advocating for and encouraging the uptake of the program. They coordinated scheduling of the sessions, documented activities and photos, and discussed links between the program and the curriculum with educators. They also planned for next steps in terms of making use of the curriculum and how the knowledge gained from the program could be applied in the learning environment moving forward.



Grade 7/8 students worked as a team to build a home using available materials, and then did a sales pitch for their home by describing its different attributes using creativity, imagination, and oral communication skills (linked with the Language curriculum: Speaking to Communicate).

EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

The OWLS pilot program was evaluated using pre- and post-program online surveys, post-session online surveys, in-session observations, and a post-program interview with the Experiential Learning SAT. All four classroom teachers completed the pre-program survey, one classroom teacher completed the post-program survey, and the majority of post-session surveys were completed by the classroom teachers. Observations were completed by up to three community health promoters from the Health Unit who were present at the sessions.

This report focuses on NPSC's evaluation priorities, specifically student outcomes and educator experiences.

The photos in this report are used with permission from NPSC.

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

There were many positive outcomes of the OWLS program for both students and educators:

STUDENT OUTCOMES

Students met curriculum and learning goals through outdoor games and activities.

Literacy skills were built through developing new vocabulary, listening to oral stories, learning about sentence structure, and creating their own stories. **Numeracy skills** were developed through various math games (e.g., dice games, grouping, counting).

Students developed important life skills and competencies.

Students **worked collaboratively** in teams or groups and **communicated** with their peers through listening and speaking. **Critical thinking, creativity, and innovation** were developed in situations where students had to problem-solve, create, and use their imagination (e.g., create a shelter and sell it as real estate, build a bridge for their animal).

Students acquired skills and attitudes that are necessary to lead a positive and healthy lifestyle.

Students were **physically active** throughout the outdoor learning sessions (e.g., running to get materials or to play a game, walking through the woods).

Adaptiveness and resilience were developed in numerous ways throughout the program, and students had the chance to apply these skills to real-life situations. Students encountered challenges and had to problem-solve. When they experienced the cold weather, students learned they needed to adapt their clothing if they did not have enough layers (e.g., put on extra mitts or socks, be better prepared for the next session). Students witnessed educators needing to adapt their plans based on the weather.

Students were given the responsibility of **assessing the risks** around them and were guided by the facilitator on how to consider safety when outdoors (e.g., how do we stay safe on ice?). Developing risk assessment skills from a young age enables students to assess different kinds of risks as they grow and advocate for their well-being in the future.

MEETING THE ENDS

The ENDS statements reflect the long-term results and impacts that the Nipissing-Parry Sound Catholic District School Board aims to produce in the community.

- ✓ Attitudes for a positive, healthy lifestyle (2.0)
- ✓ Responsible, respectful, and caring stewards (3.0)
- ✓ Literacy and numeracy (4.1)
- ✓ Communication (4.5)
- ✓ Work collaboratively (4.7)
- ✓ Critical thinking, creativity, and innovation (4.8)



While playing the dice-rolling numeracy game, these students decided to sort their materials into distinct groups.



Students ran to collect different types of words and worked in teams to create sentences using the words. The classroom teacher co-facilitated by assessing the students' sentences and whether they earned a point or had to try again.

Students developed respect and stewardship for the environment.

By being outside, students had the chance to **connect with the environment** and increase their understanding and awareness of the Earth (e.g., learning about animals, how to identify tracks in the forest). In doing so, they had the chance to develop their appreciation for the environment, and learn how to be **responsible, respectful, and caring** towards it (e.g., staying on the path helps protect the forest).

Students enjoyed and were engaged in the outdoor learning experience.

During the OWLS sessions, students were having fun, smiling, and **excited to be outside**. When something new was introduced, students were willing to **actively participate**, watch attentively, engage with the materials (e.g., ropes, tarps), and figure out what they had to do.



Students learned a story about the barred owl and practiced its call.



Students worked in teams to explore the use of different materials to build a bridge strong enough to support a toy animal. The classroom teacher asked the students what it meant to be in a team, and one student responded, “it means working together”.

EDUCATOR OUTCOMES

The OWLS program increased educators’ awareness of outdoor education strategies and how to **meet curriculum requirements outdoors**.

The CEC facilitators aimed to align the activities with the teachers’ classroom goals and shared advice on how to plan such activities. They mentored how to take any classroom learning opportunity and adapt it for the outdoors (e.g., using outdoor materials and the environment).

OWLS gave educators new ideas for using resources and materials outdoors.

The CEC facilitators shared **ways to use materials** that educators may already have in their classrooms, that they can easily access, and that are not very expensive in order to support outdoor learning.

OWLS allowed educators to receive **professional development through hands-on, outdoor experiential learning**.

Educators observed, asked questions, collaborated, and problem-solved with the facilitators **in real-time** while the students were also learning. No supply coverage was required while this professional development took place.

The OWLS program was an opportunity for educators to see the **experiential learning cycle in action**.

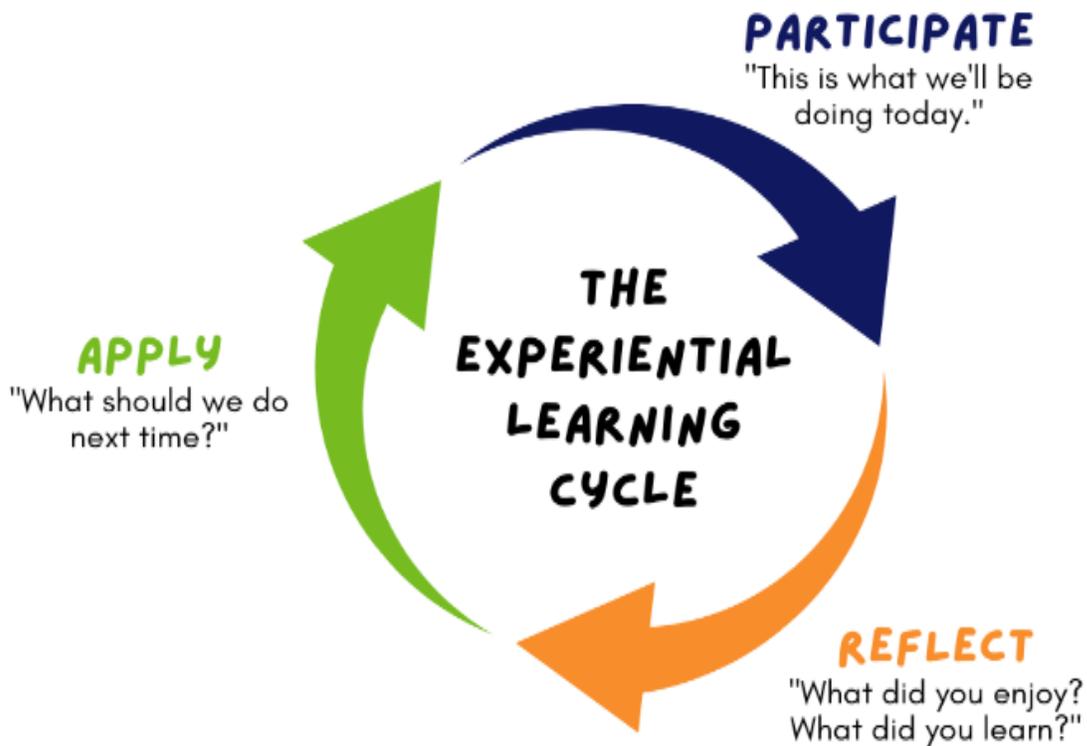
Although this was not an explicit focus of the sessions, the CEC facilitators demonstrated how the three aspects of the experiential learning cycle (**participate, reflect, apply**) can easily be integrated into facilitating outdoor learning activities.

Educators were inspired and excited to implement the learnings from the OWLS program.

OWLS ignited or re-ignited the **spark to learn more**, reminded educators of things they already knew, and inspired them to **use their knowledge** in different ways. It provided an opportunity for conversations and knowledge exchange among educators and within school teams about how to collaborate, address challenges, and “make outdoor learning work”.

Educators enjoyed the program.

Educators expressed how they **enjoyed** being able to get outside with their students and see their students’ excitement, exploration, and learning.



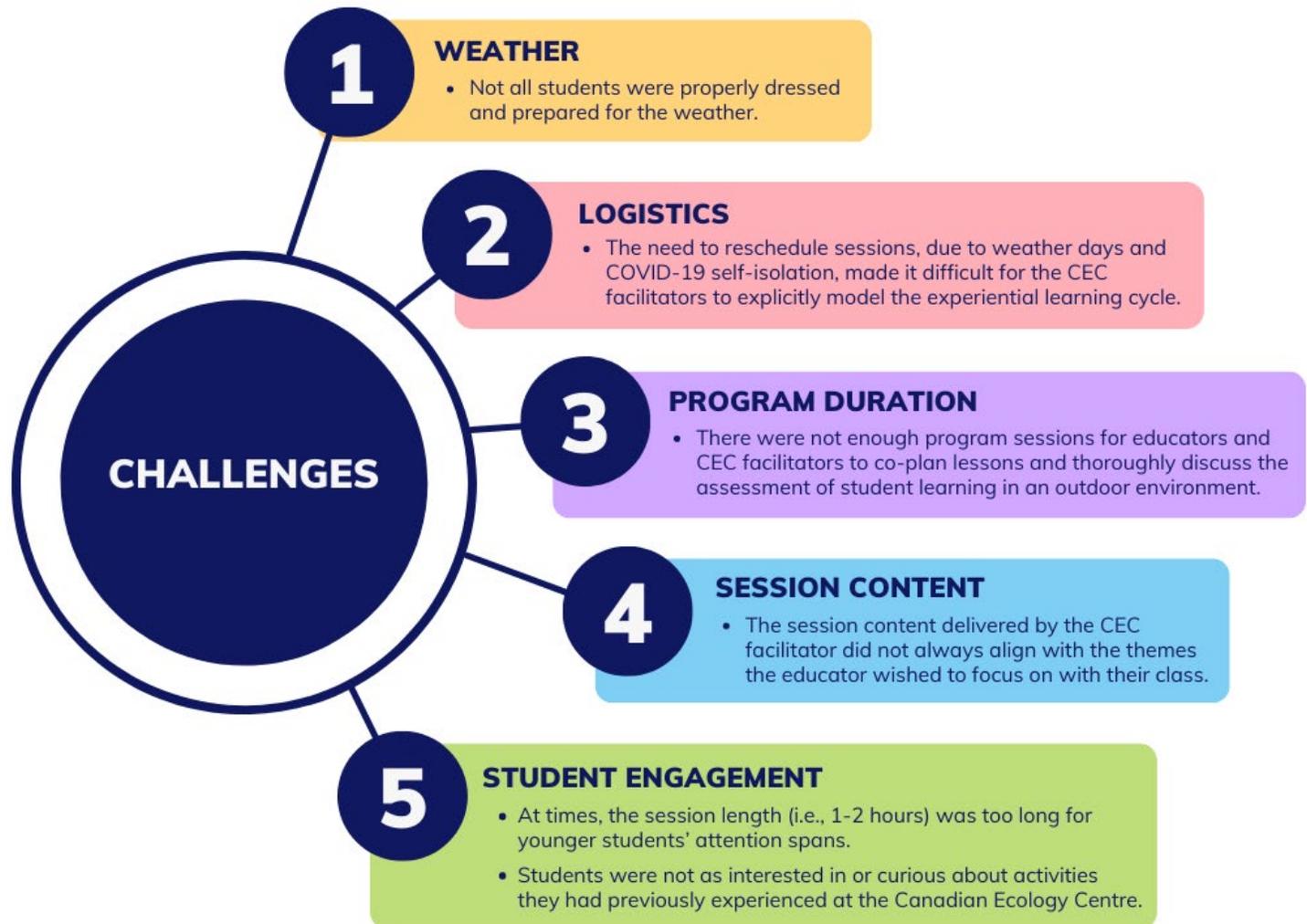
Students observed how pulleys help make lifting loads of snow easier.



Students were drawn to the ice in the school yard and learned to assess risk through exploratory play. They ran, slid, and developed stability. They worked together to chip at the ice and learned about water turning to ice when it is cold outside.

PROGRAM CHALLENGES

In addition to the positive outcomes for students and educators, there were some challenges experienced during the OWLS program:



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR OUTDOOR LEARNING

FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

1. Communicate the value of outdoor learning within the school community to **ensure educators feel supported** and understood in doing it.
2. Put processes in place that facilitate the **use of the school's natural environment** (e.g., parental permission form signed at the start of the school year for use of the trails for local excursions).
3. Embrace **opportunities for educators** to increase their understanding and belief in the benefits of outdoor learning, to learn from one another, and to gain experience teaching outdoors.
4. Have **resources and materials** for outdoor learning available for educators to use and consider the best way to transport these during different seasons (e.g., wagon for fall and spring, sleigh for winter).



While listening to a story, many students were fidgeting and distracted by the snow. The facilitator noticed this and allowed the students' interest to guide the learning. They challenged students to cover themselves up with snow as fast as they could, and this led to a discussion about different types of snow.

5. For professional learning opportunities like OWLS, make sure there is **time allotted for co-planning** between the classroom educator and program facilitator to ensure coherence between lessons and alignment with educators' expectations.
6. Understand that **things do not always go as planned** and encourage educators to be willing to adapt and try again in a different way.
7. Continue to foster **relationships with community partners** (e.g., Health Unit, CEC) that have aligned goals and interests in order to enable outdoor professional learning opportunities for educators, such as OWLS.

FOR EDUCATORS

1. **Make use of your school's natural environment** (e.g., trails, sand, field, forest) to engage in outdoor learning.
2. Build upon and foster **students' existing enjoyment** of the outdoors by continuing to seek opportunities to bring learning outside.
3. **Recognize the parallels** between outdoor learning and learning in the classroom. Just as there are challenges in a regular classroom, there will be challenges that come up with outdoor learning as well.
4. **Have conversations with other educators** to learn from one another and to capitalize on existing comfort levels, experience, value, and understanding of outdoor learning.
5. Consider **stocking extra outdoor clothing** items (e.g., socks, mitts, snow pants, hats, rain gear, extra layers) in case students are not prepared for the day's weather, so that they may still be able to participate.
6. **Develop a schedule and establish routines** for outdoor learning – and stick to these as best as possible. This gives students the chance to learn and practice the routine, making it easier as time goes on.
7. For facilitated learning opportunities like OWLS, request an outline of activities ahead of time from the facilitator to **help yourself prepare and to prepare your students** for the activities you will be doing.
8. Be **open to variation** and understand that outdoor learning will not always look the same and will vary depending on the group, school, season, and year.

8 TIPS FOR EDUCATORS ON HOW TO BRING LEARNING OUTDOORS

- 1 Make use of your environment
- 2 Build on students' existing enjoyment
- 3 Recognize the parallels
- 4 Talk to other educators
- 5 Stock extra outdoor clothing
- 6 Develop a schedule
- 7 Prepare yourself and your students
- 8 Be open to variation

