



Let's go Outside: A Mixed-Methodological Evaluation of an Outdoor Play Practitioner Program

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Abstract

Background: Across Canada, there is growing recognition that outdoor and nature-based learning can support children's physical, social, and emotional development. (Philpott & Miller Pitt, 2022). While the benefits of outdoor education are well documented (Lovell, 2009; Harris, 2021), far less is known about how to adequately prepare educators to teach in outdoor settings. Many teachers express enthusiasm for outdoor learning but also uncertainty about risk management, curriculum integration, and their own competence in nature-based environments (Patchen et al., 2024). These gaps are particularly evident in Atlantic Canada, where few professional learning opportunities exist to support outdoor education practice. This ongoing study investigates the impact of an Outdoor Play Practitioner Training Program (OPPTP) on participants' knowledge, confidence, and comfort with outdoor learning. The research aimed to: (1) identify participants' perceived experience, confidence, and competence before and after the OPPTP; and (2) explore how the OPPTP shapes participants' willingness and readiness to implement nature-based learning within school contexts.

Methodology: Using a mixed methodological design, in partnership with Cloudberry Outdoor Play and Education Centre. 15 individuals from Newfoundland and Labrador completed a pre-training survey in November 2025. Focus groups were conducted after the certification program in January 2026. The focus group data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to explore patterns in participants' reflections, perceived growth, and evolving attitudes toward outdoor teaching.

Results and conclusions: To reflect the findings of our study, we have identified three key themes along with six subthemes. The three themes identified were: first, experiential, hands-on learning enhances educators' practice. Secondly, reframing safety to support risky play, and finally, building confidence and competence in facilitating outdoor play. This research contributed to national conversations on teacher preparation for outdoor and nature-based learning. By examining both competence and comfort, it provides insight into how experiential professional development can empower educators to transform outdoor spaces into inclusive, engaging environments for meaningful student learning and well-being.

Keywords: Outdoor education; Teacher training; Nature-based learning; Professional development



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