

A Year with the BC Early Learning Framework

Maryam Naddaf

For the past few years, Maryam Naddaf offered the year-long workshop series called A Year with the BC Early Learning Framework to give educators the opportunity to learn about the framework, reflect, and engage in critical dialogue with colleagues in their communities. In this article, Maryam explores what motivated her to develop this series, the intentions of the workshop series, and what she learned from the three years of offering the series across the province—including the challenges of professional development for early childhood educators.

When I read the BC Early Learning Framework (2017) for the first time, I had goosebumps. It was so exciting to read the ideas, values, and principles shared in this document and to think that this could be the beginning of a magical movement in our province's early years education. The philosophy behind the approach offered in this framework is beautiful, so I found it hard to imagine why some educators weren't interested in putting it into their practice.

I realized, however, that as beautiful as this framework is, it is written in a complex language that many educators are not used to, and it offers a set of principles without going deeply into how to put them into practice. I also realized that even educators who had read the framework and wanted to apply the principles were finding it difficult to do so. It is important to recognize that the BC Early Learning Framework is revolutionary. This framework imagines a different educational system with a very different set of educational intentions than our traditional educational system. As educators, we need to adopt a very different perception of children and consequently change the practices that we are so used to in our daily lives.

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Developing a Learning Series About the BC Early Learning Framework

I started to reflect on how to develop a professional learning program about the BC Early Learning Framework. I knew that educators would become more invested in the framework if they had the opportunity to discover what it holds at its heart. I knew that offering one-time workshops could not provide the time and space for participants to dive deep into such a rich document. Studying the Early Learning Framework requires an approach that reflects its principles—a format that empowers the learners; allows time for deep, vulnerable, critical

reconsideration of values, reflection and space to discuss confusion, doubts, perceptions, and practices, and awakens critical thinking.

I wanted to create a longer-term learning opportunity in which educators could stay together to develop connections with one another that open up uncomfortable conversations about themselves, their identity as educators, the perceptions of the child, and dig deeply into the concepts of the framework to build capacity within their own communities. Understanding and using the Early Learning Framework involves examining society's systems and values that influence and shape our perceptions. Ultimately, I developed

the workshop series, *A Year with the BC Early Learning Framework (A Year with BCELF)*, to foster this kind of sustained inquiry and reflection, examining societal systems and values that shape our perceptions and practices.

About the Series

A Year with BCELF consists of both online and in-person workshops that run through a whole school year (usually from September/October to May/June). The series is designed so that a group of 30 to 40 participants can meet with each other approximately once a month. A broad spectrum of early care and learning professionals, such as educators, school district teachers, and Strong Start facilitators, come together and learn from one another through dialogue. The learning environment is intentionally created to spark courageous, unguarded conversations that allow participants to question everything.

I wanted participants to have the opportunity to actually experience the BCELF in practice, so we invited participants to tour the Frog Hollow Children's programs, where I work in Vancouver as part of the series. Our centres have been implementing and cultivating a pedagogical approach in concert with the BCELF for the past 20 years. I knew this would be a great opportunity for the participants to visit our centres on a weekday to see the children and educators as they live and learn together.

A Year with BCELF would not have been possible without the ECE Professional Development Bursary Program, which covered 100% of the facilitation fees, as well as all venue and food costs for in-person sessions.



Participants from the Cariboo/Chilcotin group during one of the hands-on experiences to understand the process of pedagogical narration.

The Bursary Program also partially funded travel-related expenses for local travel within communities, as well as accommodations for those travelling within the region.

During the first year of this series (2022–2023), I worked with the Vernon/Shuswap and Nanaimo/Parksville communities. This series' work took place in partnership with the communities' Child Care Resource and Referral (CCRR) centres, which acted as a connecting

bridge between Frog Hollow and local educators. Holding this series in two different communities with very different identities helped me gather valuable information that was key to redesigning some elements of the workshop series. Building on the work begun in the Vernon/Shuswap and Nanaimo/Parksville regions, I offered the series to five other communities in 2023–2024: Prince Rupert/Smithers/Terrace, Quesnel, Penticton, Trail/Castlegar, and Sooke.

During the 2024–2025 year, I extended the series to three more communities: Port Hardy, Peace River (Fort St. John, Fort Nelson, Dawson Creek), and Kootenay/Chilcotin (Williams Lake, 100 Mile House, Bella Coola, and area).

A Year with BCELF concluded at the end of the 2025 school year. I have had an opportunity to reflect on what I've learned from developing and facilitating three series over three years, as well as the systemic challenges of professional development in the early learning field.

Learnings

As the designer and facilitator of A Year with BCELF, I have had a unique opportunity to not only get to know colleagues from around BC, but also reflect on collective learnings, common themes, and emerging concepts within and throughout these diverse BC communities.

Much of the work of this series is about reflective practice which, when engaged in regularly, can lead to internal change. Reflective practice helps us to adjust our lens when observing ourselves and children—to truly see children in different ways and change our own behaviours accordingly. Educators need learning experiences that help them reflect on their own identity, values, perceptions, and create change that is long-lasting, even if results in the work environment are not immediate.

It has been extraordinary to witness participants' perceptions and practice change over the course of the nine months we spend together. Educators have shown not only higher confidence in their own practices,

but also a great deal of flexibility and humbleness in welcoming change and becoming comfortable with the uncomfortable.

This series has challenged my ideas/ image of the educator more than my image of the child! I will be practising a lot of self-reflection around our roles in our practice.

—Participant

Findings

There were many findings related to my original intentions for this series that I would like to share and reflect on as participants shared their thoughts with me.

INTENTION: To raise awareness of the BCELF and highlight the rich values at the heart of the document

Throughout the three years of A Year with BCELF, participants frequently expressed how their understanding of the BCELF has changed, and how they are now open to it as an inspiring and important tool rather than a “boring,” “irrelevant,” “wordy,” “academic,” document they “could not work with on daily basis.” In the first session, I asked participants to share their understanding of the BCELF and how they felt about it. Some participants had never heard of the BCELF, while some thought they had some understanding of it. Many participants had taken the available online BCELF Ministry of Education course or had previously enrolled in a community of practice, but continued to think that the BCELF was “a document available as a resource to refer to,” but “not as something they could live with.”

By the end of the nine months, all participants expressed greater understanding of the document and love for its principles and values.

As they reflected on their journey with this series, participants felt that they could now “actually live out the ELF” and “bring it to their everyday life,” “feeling much more confident to share with colleagues,” and advocate for it still as an important resource, but also “a beautiful tool for learning, loving, and being.”

INTENTION: To provide practical, real examples of the BCELF and help participants bring it to their daily practice.

In their initial reflections on the BCELF, most participants who had heard of or studied the framework before expressed that while they understood the importance of it, they did not understand the concepts enough to bring it to their work with children and families. In later reflections and in their final thoughts, almost every participant expressed that they now felt they “knew” what the BCELF was asking them to do, and they could think of conversations, provocations, and practices to bring back to their programs and colleagues to continue to work with the framework.

Participant Reflections

I understand a lot more, putting the ELF into practice; dissecting it has really made an impact on how to ‘use’ the framework; to become embodied with it; a state of flow; being able to reference it has more meaning to it now.

This was an opportunity to really implement the practice of truly listening, observing and to learn ways of exploring theories and making the learning visible; really thinking about my teaching intentions; I am so grateful.

INTENTION: To create long-lasting pedagogical relationships within the participants' community that would support their ongoing co-learning and co-reflection

The impact of coming together for a long period of time and focusing on the BCELF was brought up by almost every participant at the last session's verbal reflection in all cohorts. Educators expressed appreciation for each other and the learning they gained from each other's experiences as they came together and shared their minds. Educators made connections, exchanged phone numbers, and invited each other to their programs, creating collaborative spaces needed for professional growth. These pedagogical connections were further embraced when some of these participants joined the second-year series (A Year with Pedagogical Narration) and continued to work together as thinking partners throughout the year.

Participant Reflections

I am so happy to be part of this series as we come together in person and online and continue to reflect and share. I see this as part of the greater shift that is happening collectively to be in better alignment with teaching children, to be human, to be in relationship with one another

This series gave me opportunities to connect/collaborate with other educators in the field in my area.

I am so grateful to spend time with other educators; I work alone and don't usually get to spend such long periods of time with others, thinking and reflecting; this has meant a lot to me."

INTENTION: To create space and time for educators to discover their capabilities in their role as lifelong researchers

It has been an absolute pleasure to see the inner growth of individuals enrolled in this series. The most amazing part of the growth I have witnessed is the shifts in mindsets, which have led to a change of behaviour and practice in every cohort. Through verbal, written, and visual reflections, participants described how their journey felt like a flower growing from a seed or a river moving with rhythms of time and space, and they expressed their amazement in their changed image of the child, educator, and school.

Self-described "old school educators" shared that they have tried new things such as open snack or open circle time that they would never before consider. Educators expressed that the series gave them "a new image of the child" and allowed them "to have more trust in the children." Educators shared that they had felt very skeptical about the way the BCELF proposed learning could happen if children had their own autonomy, and how this doubt has shifted through this series. Many participants expressed that they now think about their intentions before making decisions, and ask "why" often, while many expressed their surprise at how "rigid" their practice and thinking were before this series, and how their "own image of the child and thoughts was the roadblock in their practice." Educators appreciated the language that was explored throughout the series and felt that they now understood the vocabulary and used it on a daily basis. I witnessed a shift in the use of language in reflections as time

went on, as participants used more thoughtful, meaningful, and reflective language in their writings. Educators expressed that they have learned to wonder more, and therefore to listen to children's wonders more. Participants had expressed they did not know much about the practice of critical reflection and did not spend much time with it, whereas by the end of the series, the practice of frequent individual and collective critical reflection was welcomed and appreciated and very visible in participants in all cohorts.

INTENTION: To ignite confidence in educators to believe in their competence not only in co-living and co-learning with children, but also in their role as advocates, collaborators, and knowledge carriers in their local communities

I began this series with many doubts as participants worried that their colleagues would resist the BCELF and it would be difficult to change their minds. By the end of the series, many participants expressed their satisfaction with the success they had in beginning conversations with their teams and implementing change in their programs. Many reflected that they learned that change is slow and small changes should be celebrated, which helped them in guiding change within their own organizations. They expressed that they felt confident in bringing things back to their team as they had a new language and a new, practical way of seeing the BCELF and talking about its concepts. Educators felt proud of being in the early years field, feeling intelligent and important—a comment I needed to sit with and reflect on, as it shares the state of mind in many of our educators in the field.

Participant Reflections

This will continue to have an impact on daily practices in our centres. We will pause and start open communication about what we are doing/ changing and why.

As we completed the course as a team, it provided us a reason to have valuable conversations about our program and philosophies

I learned ways to use the BCELF more confident and comfortable and share this with my team.

One thing I am taking back is the importance of communication and collaboration. Having conversations and coming up with ideas; building a rapport with my colleagues to build a stronger team.

Most of all, the image of the educator: I am confident, educated, knowledgeable, and capable; I am not 'just' a child care provider; I have an identity, values and am valuable in my program, with families and the community.

Systemic Challenges

To truly support BC educators in implementing the BC Early Learning Framework, structural and systemic changes in the province's early years field are required. While most of the educators I have had the pleasure to learn with have embraced the principles of the BCELF and have changed their own immediate systems to reflect the BCELF's image of the child and respond to the competent child, outdated, incompatible systems in the field create a serious burden for educators and their practices.

Over the course of three years of offering A Year with BCELF, I've heard common themes in the challenges experienced by educators across BC.

A major issue is the lack of time and funding for professional development; educators often have to attend sessions outside work hours or pay out of pocket. Reflective practice—vital for implementing the BC Early Learning Framework—is squeezed into personal time or rushed breaks. Many educators also experience professional isolation, especially those working alone or in teams where colleagues don't share their passion for the framework. Structural barriers such as insufficient staffing ratios and outdated licensing requirements further hinder BCELF adoption. There is also a disconnect between early childhood and primary educators, creating friction in a system meant to support children ages 0–8.

To maximize the impact of professional learning opportunities like A Year with BCELF, systemic changes must be made to ensure that educators have dedicated time, financial support, and collaborative environments to engage deeply with the Early Learning Framework and its principles.

One of the most common pieces of feedback I received from all the cohorts was about the opportunity to continue learning together. While the three-year funding for A Year for the Early Learning Framework has now concluded, I am hopeful that we will be able to continue this training program in the future. There is a real need to continue these conversations in this not-so-simple field, and this need can only be met if funding continues to be available.

Acknowledgements

I am humbled and grateful to the many participants who trusted me and their colleagues and allowed themselves to be vulnerable and

open to change. I am thankful for the support and partnership of the CCRRs in the host communities. I am truly grateful to the ECE Professional Development Bursary Fund and Kathleen Riel for listening and reading my reflections, holding deep, ongoing dialogue, and encouraging me to continue my work with this series.

In my work in the not-for-profit sector, I engage with many funding opportunities and my unique experience with the ECE Professional Development Bursary Fund has been vital for the success of this series. Contrary to the traditional transactional relationship between funders and recipients in non-profit settings, the development of the BCELF series continues as a collaborative process of wonder, imagination, and reflection in a reciprocal relationship based on trust, curiosity, and partnership.

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