



Trauma Informed Land-Based Pilot: A Community Initiative in Toronto Parks

A Report

Native Child and Family Services of Toronto and Trent University

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Executive Summary

This project, the *Trauma Informed Land-Based Pilot*, is a collaboration between Native Child and Family Services of Toronto and Trent University. The principal investigators on this project are Judith Mintz, PhD (NCFST) and Janet Miron, PhD (Trent University). This project seeks to determine how the construction of garden allotments at two NCFST Indigenous Child and Family centres could improve the quality of land-based learning in the On The Lands program, an extension of the Aboriginal HeadStart and EarlyON programs run out of the Malvern and Mount Dennis centres.

This project was designed for Native Child and Family Services of Toronto to understand how land-based education can be used to improve programming and to help with the healing journeys of families suffering from the intergenerational effects of Residential Schools in the city of Toronto.

Any recommendations implemented from this report will be funded by existing budgets for the On The Lands programs at the Malvern or Mount Dennis centres. Although this project focused specifically on these two NCFST locations, the results of the research are meant to be applicable to the broader Native Child and Family Services Community.

Community consultations were conducted with members of the Community Councils at both the Malvern and Mount Dennis hubs, as well as with staff members from the On The Lands programs at both locations. Community members were asked a series of questions that had been developed in keeping with Medicine Wheel teachings about land-based education, their experiences with elders and children, and more. Staff were asked specific logistical questions that correspond to the required components of the City of Toronto's community garden proposal.

Findings of the research show that community members seek more opportunities for their children and families to be on the land, and that there is a desire for more learning opportunities about the land in Toronto. Community members outlined several specific logistics that they feel are necessary in the design of new gardens, and described the required components for a garden to be a welcoming and healing space for their families. Community members also expressed that they feel there are already a great number of gardens at different NCFST locations that are not properly cared for.

Staff provided estimates for the amount of time the On The Lands program would be able to commit to the upkeep of a new garden, and expressed some concern about the feasibility of building a new off-site garden without guaranteed storage or water access.

Ultimately, this report recommends the revitalization and improvement of existing gardens at the Malvern and Mount Dennis Indigenous Child and Family centres. This should include some structural changes to make the space accessible. This report also recommends an internal review of all NCFST gardens be done to determine their quality and use by the community. Finally, this report recommends that the proper research protocols be followed for all community-based research projects at NCFST, and that community be kept up to date about the results of those projects.



Project Characteristics

Program Name and Service Supervisor

This research project affects the On The Lands programming at both the Malvern and Mount Dennis Indigenous Child and Family Centres. The On The Lands program is an extension of the Aboriginal HeadStart and EarlyON programs which are run out of both Native Child and Family Services of Toronto centres.

This research is a collaboration between Native Child and Family Services of Toronto and Trent University, where Judith Mintz and Janet Miron act as principal investigators from each organization, respectively.

Questions Guiding the Work

This work was guided by a desire to understand how land-based education works to dismantle the structures of colonialism and the legacy of Residential Schools in urban areas. Through community consultations, this research project sought to discover how On The Lands programming can be improved through the inclusion of gardens to be used by program participants and their families, as well as the Native Child community at large.

Funder and Reporting

Any findings from this research project will be implemented and funded through the On The Lands programs run out of the Malvern and Mount Dennis Hubs, which are an extension of the Aboriginal HeadStart and EarlyON programs. Any changes made to the programs as a result of this report will be overseen by and reported to the Indigenous Child and Family Centre Early Years Supervisor at each location.

Scope and Deliverables

This research project applies directly to the Malvern and Mount Dennis Indigenous Child and Family Centres, although findings from this report may be used to inform projects at other Indigenous Child and Family Centres across Toronto.

The goal of this specific project was to determine community wants and needs for a garden space to be used by On The Lands program participants and their families at both the Malvern and Mount Dennis locations.

Methods

Research Methodologies

The design of this research project was heavily grounded in Indigenous principles of research and Indigenous methodologies and was based in the importance of land-based education for Indigenous people and communities in both rural and urban areas. The research was conducted in two parts: Firstly, community members were consulted in both individual and group virtual sharing circles and asked a series of questions about their experiences with children, elders, land-based learning, and NCFST programming. Secondly, staff from the Malvern and Mount Dennis Aboriginal HeadStart and EarlyON Programs were consulted about the integration of gardens into the On The Lands programming.



Community members were asked questions that were designed to remain in balance with the medicine wheel as it is used in Anishinaabe communities, as this was the method familiar to the Primary Investigators. Staff were asked questions that related directly to the City of Toronto's Community Garden proposal outline.

The data gathered was qualitative in nature. All consulted community members are part of the Community Council at their respective NCFST locations, are well-known within the community, and have family members or are themselves enrolled in NCFST programming.

Staff who were consulted are all directly involved with the delivery of the On The Lands programming and are familiar with the structure of the program as it currently exists and how proposed changes from this report might be implemented. They were also able to provide clarity on questions regarding the logistics of creating a new garden for use by the On The Lands program participants and their families.

Data Collection

Consultations with Community Members

When asked about their experiences with elders, many community members shared stories about learning with their grandparents. Some spoke of their experiences growing and gathering medicines, fruits and vegetables from their grandparents' gardens, or from elsewhere on the land. Some spoke about the learning they continue to do with elders from their communities to grow their own knowledges of plants and animals in the area. Some expressed that when they were growing up, they felt uncomfortable asking questions to elders, but as adults have realized that this discomfort came from a shared trauma from the Residential School System.

When community members spoke about their experiences with children, many shared that they feel an obligation to expose their children to the land as much as possible. Some shared a gratitude to programming that allowed their children to be outdoors regularly, as that is a priority for them and their families. Others expressed how children need space not only to learn, but to share their learning with other children in their communities outside of their immediate families. Many felt that parenting and child-rearing extends beyond the immediate family or parents, and having a larger community allows their children to be exposed to more experiences. Many community members stressed that children should be allowed to learn in a hands-on way.

Community members indicated that they would like to see a large variety of flowers, vegetables, fruits and medicines in any potential new gardens. Specifically, plants that are native to the Dish with One Spoon Covenant area but are difficult to find due to the urbanization of the area should be a priority. Berries of all kinds, sweetgrass, tobacco, juniper, balsam fir, cucumbers and tomatoes are all specific examples that were brought up in consultations.

To make the gardens a welcoming and healing space, community members emphasized the need for consistent support from NCFST program staff. Some expressed a desire for events and programs directly related to the care of the gardens, and that staff should be knowledgeable enough on the contents of the garden to be able to provide teachings to both children and their families. Community members would like opportunities to learn about planting, harvesting, and gardening in



general all site, and would like children to be able to be involved in all aspects of gardening, from seed to harvest.

Community members emphasized that the gardens must be accessible so they may be enjoyed by all community members. They should be near existing NCFST centres, and should also be near public transit so they can be easily accessed. Many expressed that NCFST should provide tools and equipment for gardening and have them available at the Indigenous Child and Family Centres. There should be signage with guidelines for the gardens, a paved or otherwise wheelchair accessible walkway, and somewhere shaded to sit and take refuge from the sun. Community members also expressed the importance of water access, and proximity to washrooms. The gardens should be a sober space. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there should also be visible protocols for physical distancing while in the gardens.

Some community members expressed concern about the construction of a new garden, noting that there is often a lack of follow through with NCFST programs and events, especially when it comes to the maintenance of existing gardens. Some voiced that often, NCFST staff do not inform community members about the goings on in the garden, and that the gardens inevitable become underused and neglected. If a new garden were to be built, staff and community alike must come to an understanding about the intention of the gardens, and must be equally committed to the upkeep and maintenance of the garden.

Consultations with Staff

Brief consultations were conducted with existing NCFST staff who are involved in the delivery of the On The Lands program in order to determine the logistics of creating a new garden at the Malvern and Mount Dennis Indigenous Child and Family Centres.

Staff identified that it would be realistic for On The Lands program staff to commit to scheduled maintenance time in the gardens once a week, and that dependent on size, tools and maintenance equipment would be able to be stored at the NCFST centres.

When asked about the logistics of a watering system for the gardens, staff identified that the availability of on site water would depend on the accessibility of City of Toronto water keys and the proximity to Indigenous Child and Family centres. Staff also pointed to the possibility of implementing a rainwater collection system in the event that plumbing were not available.

With regards to the accessibility of the gardens outside of program hours, staff suggested the possibility of a community tool box for families to use in the evenings and on weekends, or for families to be assigned sets of tools to be able to bring home and use for the duration of their enrolment in the programs.



Service Recommendations

Recommendations for Malvern and Mount Dennis Hubs

1. Revitalizing existing on-site gardens at both NCFST centres:
 - a. Consult with Community Councils about which medicines, flowers, fruits and vegetables they feel are lacking in the existing gardens
 - b. Evaluate the accessibility of the gardens and ensure the inclusion of the following
 - i. A pathway that is accessible by wheelchair and stroller
 - ii. A shaded sitting area
 - iii. An area to place a tikinaagan
 - c. Install sun protection for areas of the garden that require shade in order to grow properly
 - d. Consider the construction of a covered greenhouse area to move plants to in the winter months
 - e. Designate a specific teaching area in each of the gardens.
2. Integrate the revitalized gardens into the structure of the On The Lands programming:
 - a. Allow program participants and their families to be involved in the planning, planting, maintenance and harvesting of the gardens
 - b. Provide staff training so that staff may give teachings about the gardens as part of the program curriculum
 - c. Host workshops outside of regular program hours for program participants and their families that are directly related to the care of the gardens
 - i. Some examples may be jam making workshops, canning workshops, medicine teachings, etc.
 - d. Allow program participants and their families to access the garden freely outside of regular program hours.
3. Keep the community informed about the status of the gardens:
 - a. Utilize all existing forms of communication to regularly update program participants and their families, as well as other community members about activities taking place in the gardens
 - b. Notify community members when plants are ready to be harvested so they may make plans to visit the gardens
4. Follow up with Malvern and Mount Dennis Community Councils about the findings of this report.

Recommendations for Native Child and Family Services of Toronto At Large

1. Conduct an internal review of existing gardens that are operated by NCFST:
 - a. Determine how often each garden is used
 - b. Consult with community members to determine if revitalization is appropriate for each individual garden
 - c. Remove gardens that are deemed by community members to be redundant, especially if they contain traditional medicines.
2. Keep the community informed about the status of broader NCFST gardens:
 - a. Utilize all existing forms of communication to regularly update community members about activities taking place in all NCFST gardens



- b. Notify community members when plants are ready to be harvested so they may make plans to visit the gardens
 - c. Provide community members with round-trip TTC fare should they need it to visit any NCFST gardens.
- 3. Maintain consistency with research subcommittee policies for future research projects
- 4. Follow up with community members on any and all research projects that they may be involved in.