Enhancing Displaced Workers' Literacy and Essential Skills

Final Project Report

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INTRODUCTION

The Enhancing Displaced Workers' Literacy and Essential Skills (DWLES) project is a collaborative project that was managed by Decoda Literacy Solutions (Decoda) and supported by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC) and Learning Metrix. The overall goal of the project is to enhance knowledge and raise awareness of promising literacy and essential skills (LES) interventions for displaced workers in Canada to improve their employability. The project started in June 2019 and finished in June 2022. This project received an extension to December 2023 to run pilot projects, the results of which will be covered in future reports.

The following report details the main findings of the beta-test project. Section one of the report provides an overview of the project and situates the project within the broader context. Section two provides a brief overview of the individual beta-test sites that were part of the project. Section three outlines the research methodology, including some of the limitations. Section four outlines key findings related to learners who participated in the individual beta-test projects and section five outlines key findings related to the beta-test organizations themselves, as well as the broader communities. Finally, sections six and seven provide overall project reflections and conclusions.

PROJECT RATIONALE

The overall goal of the DWLES project is to enhance knowledge and raise awareness of promising literacy and essential skills (LES) interventions for displaced workers in Canada to improve their employability. More specifically, the project aims to better understand how literacy organizations can support hard-to-reach remote and rural communities by integrating LES and employment services for a range of displaced workers, with a particular focus on equity-deserving groups such as women, Indigenous peoples, people with disabilities, and others. Given the nature of the communities in which the project operated, it also provides important insights into the challenges and opportunities associated with delivering innovative workforce development approaches in rural and remote communities in Canada.

Rural and remote communities face unique challenges in terms of job displacement, training needs, as well as services delivery. Approximately one-fifth of Canadians live in rural communities, contributing nearly 30 per cent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) (Infrastructure Canada, 2019). Rural communities are extremely diverse. Some rural communities are coastal and have historically focused on fisheries, others are located in the interior and are focused on farming, mining, or tourism. Many rural communities are located in the north and are only accessible by airplane or boat, whereas others are closer to urban centres and are populated by retirees. Some regions in Canada are also more rural than others. For example, nearly 50 per cent of Atlantic Canadians live in rural areas, compared to less than 10 per cent of British Columbians (Infrastructure Canada, 2019).

What is consistent about rural communities is their diversity. Rural communities tend to have stronger Indigenous representation, fewer recent immigrants, and a slightly older population compared to urban Canada. For example, 16 per cent of rural labour force participants report an Indigenous identity compared to 4 per cent in urban Canada. However, 40 per cent of labour force participants in rural Manitoba and 35 per cent in Saskatchewan report an Indigenous identity. Successful rural development will thus necessitate prioritizing political, economic, and social development for all Indigenous peoples and communities (Rich et al., 2021).[1]

In terms of employment, rural communities are an integral part of the Canadian economy as major contributors to the tourism, high-tech, and manufacturing sectors, and are critical for Canada's resource economy. Rural Canadians work predominantly in agriculture, mining, oil and gas, forestry, fisheries, and aquaculture (Infrastructure Canada, 2019).

[1] https://sorc.crrf.ca/fullreport2021/

Rural communities also face unique challenges. For example, the incomes of rural Canadians tend to be lower than those living in urban cities, and unemployment levels tend to be higher. Education levels also tend to be lower the further a community is from an urban centre (Rich et al., 2021). But it is the ongoing structural changes occurring in rural communities that have the greatest impact on service delivery. As stated by Lopez et al. (2017):

> *Aging populations, the migration of youth to urban areas and shifting economies are just some of the many issues facing rural communities. While this trend has been building for decades, we are reaching a tipping point where shrinking tax bases, aging infrastructure and diminishing populations are creating a situation where some rural communities cannot sustain basic levels of services and facilities that are needed to attract and retain residents and business* (p. 1).

Between 2001 and 2016, the number of potential workers in rural Canada has decreased from 1,475,220 to 1,131,830 (-23.3 per cent), whereas the number of potential retirees has increased from 1,015,940 to 1,701,540 (+40.3 per cent). In 2001, there were approximately 1.5 potential labour market participants for each potential retiree in rural Canada, but by 2016, this declined to approximately 0.7 (Canadian Federation of Municipalities, 2017). Population-related challenges in rural communities are only compounded by slowdowns in critical rural industries, such as forestry and oil and gas. It is simply devastating for a rural community to lose a local industry that employed a large percentage of the community.

Generally, rural communities have more limited public services compared to urban centres, but the challenges described above make access to services for rural Canadians even more difficult. Again, as stated by Lopez et al. (2017):

> *Amalgamation or regionalization of rural services is associated with rural decline. While closing services in small communities and focusing them in the largest community in a region may make sense from a public policy perspective, this is not usually an optimum solution for rural residents. It often means that local citizens have to travel some distance for services or can only access services by telephone or online. Regionalization represents a loss of autonomy for most small centres and presents challenges to the community's personal identities, which have been developed over many generations* (p. 5).

According to the OECD (2022), some of the key factors impacting service delivery in rural communities include:

- **Distance** – All forms of connectivity are less available and accessible for rural residents. For example, transportation costs and overall costs to provide goods and services are higher in rural areas on a per capita basis.

- **Low population** – It is more challenging to achieve economies of scale for rural goods and services.
- **Low density** – Rural areas tend to feature greater population dispersion, making connectivity harder to achieve.
- **Aging population** – With an aging population, rural residents' service needs are changing, with a greater emphasis on healthcare services.
- **Increasing diversity** – Rural communities are becoming more diverse, with an increasing proportion of newly retired people, as well as people who have purchased a second home or are commuting to the nearest urban area for work. The result is a fragmentation of demand for services and a population where significant numbers of people choose to obtain goods and services away from the place where they live.
- **Few service providers** – Due to the above factors, rural communities feature much fewer public and private service providers (OECD,[2] 2022).

It is within this overall context that this project should be considered – designing, implementing, and testing solutions to LES and employment service delivery among a diversity of rural communities in Canada.

Both urban and rural labour markets are increasingly requiring a greater need for LES. Unfortunately, large segments of the available workforce do not have the necessary LES to ensure their labour market resilience in the face of job displacements resulting from economic downturns, sector collapse, or other factors. Data from the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) indicates that nearly half (49 per cent) of Canadians aged 16-65 do not have Level 3 literacy while over half (55 per cent) do not have Level 3 math skills. These gaps are particularly evident in specific population groups, such as older workers or workers with lower education (Statistics Canada, 2013). With low LES and digital skills, displaced workers face increasing challenges to re-integrate into the labour market. There is a clear need to support displaced workers to gain LES in order to find new employment in more secure positions and sectors.

This project thus aims to provide a greater understanding of how LES needs, including digital skills, frames job displacement and workforce development in rural and remote communities in Canada.

[2] https://www.oecd.org/cfe/regionaldevelopment/service-delivery-in-rural-areas.htm

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The following section outlines the key activities of the project. As an overview, the project first selected ten literacy organizations in British Columbia (BC) to be part of the data collection phase of the project. Data collection included a literature review, interviews with the BC literacy organizations, focus groups with key stakeholders in each of the literacy organizations' communities, and a survey and interviews with displaced workers in each of the communities. The literacy organizations and project partners also met regularly throughout the project.

Following the data collection phase of the project, 11 literacy organizations across Canada, including seven of the original organizations in BC, were selected to implement and evaluate beta-test projects that integrate LES and employment services targeted for displaced workers in their communities. An evaluation was conducted of each of the beta tests, and of the project as a whole, to better understand promising practices for delivering LES and employment services in rural and remote communities.

PROJECT PARTNERS

The following briefly describes the roles/responsibilities of each project partner involved in designing and delivering the DWLES project.

- **Decoda Literacy Solutions (Decoda)** was the lead for the project and provided project management, support, and oversight. As part of this role, Decoda administered the Request for Proposal (RfP) processes and managed funding agreements with the successful literacy organizations.

- **SRDC** was responsible for leading the research and evaluation activities of the project, including conducting the literature reviews, interviews, focus groups, surveys, and beta-test evaluations.

- **Learning Metrix** was responsible for database management, programming the online surveys, and collecting survey data through their online platform.

- **Canadian National Advisory Committee (CNAC)** met regularly to provide guidance on the project and share best practices to support beta-test project implementation. The 11-person committee included five provincial literacy organization leaders, as well as a national group of literacy content experts, academics, and others.

PHASE 1 – DATA COLLECTION

Selection of BC Team Leaders

Decoda circulated a survey to all 100 of their Literacy Outreach Coordinators (LOCs) across BC in June 2019. The survey responses provided detailed information on the needs of the LOC communities, as well as identified regions where there have been displacement events. Decoda used the survey responses to select the ten BC Team Leaders that would lead community-based research activities based on their expressed interest in the project and the demonstrated needs of their communities. This group of LOCs formed the foundation for the data collection phase and met regularly throughout the following phase of the project.

The selected LOCs represented the following organizations:

- Campbell River Community Literacy Association
- Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy
- Fort Nelson Community Literacy Society
- Fort St. John Literacy Society
- Autumn Services Centre
- Mount Waddington Family Literacy Society
- Literacy Quesnel Society
- Capilano University
- South Island Literacy
- Yellowhead Community Services Society.

Literature review

Following the selection of the BC Team Leaders, a literature review was conducted to provide an overview of displaced workers in Canada and to identify effective interventions for improving the employment outcomes for this population. The literature review was guided by three questions:

1. What are the demographic characteristics and re-employment outcomes of displaced workers in general and with respect to specific populations (e.g., women, older workers, Indigenous people, and newcomers)?

2. What are current interventions and tools that utilize LES training to support the re-employment of displaced workers?

3. Which BC regions are experiencing significant levels of worker displacement?

The following factors were identified in the literature as promising practices for successful interventions for displaced workers and/or workers with LES gaps:

- **Participant assessment** – An initial assessment is necessary to ensure the program is appropriate to meet participants' needs and to redirect participants to other programming if necessary. Ongoing assessment also allows service providers to adjust programming and services as necessary. Exit assessments can support program evaluation and should inform follow-up activities.

- **Clearly defined goals** – Clearly defined and realistic goals increase participants' confidence in achieving their objectives. In addition, a focused job search can positively impact employment.

- **Program design that is focused on individual participant needs** – This includes addressing barriers faced by specific demographic groups within the program's target populations and including program activities that will meet the unique needs and goals of participants.

- **Identify and meet local labour market needs** – Stakeholder engagement and partnerships with industry and community organizations can inform programming and ensure it meets local employer needs. Using learning materials and activities that reflect the kinds of tasks that workers need to carry out is also important. A focus on employability skills can facilitate participants transitioning from learners to workers.

- **Build professional credentials and career ladders** – The potential to gain a certification at the end of the program further supports participants' employment and enhances their motivation, focus, and commitment.

- **Work placements** – The provision of work placements can connect participants with employers and allow them to apply their learning in a workplace environment.

- **Financial assistance** – Offering financial compensation and support can ensure completion and participant commitment.

- **Provide peer-to-peer support** – Providing peer-to-peer support and mentoring allows participants to improve their communication skills and motivates participants.
- **Connect and integrate LES and Employment Services** – Bringing together staff from both sectors for joint planning to provide enhanced support for participants and integrate services whenever possible.
- **Holistic approach, such as providing support to clients' family members**. Offering support to clients' family members through training, counseling, or other services, can be an effective way of strengthening the clients' broader social network.[3]

The full literature review can be accessed here.

Interviews with BC Team Leaders and focus groups with key community stakeholders

Interviews

SRDC researchers conducted an initial round of interviews with the ten BC Team Leaders to provide a greater understanding of each of the organizations as well as the overall context of their communities in relation to displaced workers. The interviews covered the topics of regional displacement events and displaced worker characteristics, existing interventions and supports, successes and gaps of current programming, and areas of innovation and promising practices. BC Team Leaders were contacted between August and September 2019 and were provided a list of questions ahead of the interview. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, lasting approximately one hour.

Focus groups

Focus groups were conducted in each of the BC Team communities (for a total of 10 communities). The purpose of the focus groups was to capture a wide range of experiences in order to provide insights into the issues, challenges, and successes in terms of each communities' support for displaced workers. The focus groups included a variety of participants, including service providers, community members, city council members, employers, among other community stakeholders. Each focus group involved developing the required research instruments (protocols and consent forms), co-facilitating the sessions, recording, and capturing data, and analyzing the findings. Each of the BC Team Leaders played an instrumental role in

[3] See the full literature review report for detailed analysis.

organizing appropriate dates and venues for the focus groups; identifying, recruiting, and hosting participants; and co-facilitating the sessions with the SRDC team.

A first set of focus groups were conducted in the October–November 2019 in Fort Nelson, Fort St. John, East Kootenays (Cranbrook), West Kootenays (Nelson), and Squamish. From January–March 2020, the remaining focus groups were conducted in Fraser Lake, Quesnel, Port McNeill, Campbell River, Clearwater, and Sooke.

Key findings

Based on the data collected through the interviews and focus groups, a few key themes were identified related to best practices, innovative approaches, and important considerations for effective and innovative programming. Stakeholders who participated in the focus groups emphasized the importance of a place-based and community-driven approach to supporting displaced workers. Amongst the best-practices and innovative approaches identified by focus group participants were examples of programs that were community-based and focused on addressing immediate community needs. Focus group participants also highlighted that communities with established community stakeholder planning committees were in a good position to assess and adjust programs as needed. Programs that were flexible, in terms of both location and duration, were best able to meet displaced workers where they were at and in a format that best suited the learner. Most communities mentioned that a major barrier to program implementation is a lack of visibility and general awareness of available community programs. This pointed to the need to ensure that communications efforts to increase program visibility and recognition are given priority during the planning and implementation of the DWLES project pilots.

The full report can be accessed here.

Survey and interviews of displaced workers

Provincial survey of displaced workers

The objective of the displaced workers survey was to better understand the overall context and needs of displaced workers in BC who have low LES, including what supports would be most useful to meet their needs. The objectives of the survey were guided by the project's primary research questions, as outlined in the project research framework, including:

- What are the LES needs of displaced workers as learners and as workers in communities where they reside?

- What types of training and supports hold potential for assisting displaced workers with low LES who seek re-employment or self-employment?
- What is the place of digital skills in the labour market, and the skills demands of our economy, particularly for workers who have low essential skills, particularly in the digital domain?

In addition to these guiding research questions, the survey was informed by the findings from the literature review, media scan, interviews, and focus groups completed by SRDC in the first stage of the project.

The survey aimed to capture the perspectives of displaced workers to inform the development of the beta-test projects in the next phase of the project, as well as contribute to the project's overall research findings on the circumstances and LES needs of displaced workers in Canada.

The survey's sampling design took a targeted approach to engage with as many displaced workers as possible in the communities selected for this phase of the research. As such, the survey was not designed to provide a representative sample of displaced workers in BC or the targeted communities. The following outlines key aspects of the survey methodology:

- Displaced workers with low LES in ten communities were the population of interest;
- LOCs were the key points of contact for recruiting respondents and disseminating the survey in their communities;
- Working with community partners, former employers/HR, unions, etc., LOCs established a network for identifying displaced workers and supporting them to complete the survey;
- The survey was available to be completed by paper or online to ensure that it was accessible to all displaced workers; and
- There were no specific completion targets set for LOCs; the goal was to complete as many surveys as possible within the timeframe available.

The survey was piloted in four communities: five surveys were completed in Fort Nelson, six in Fort St. John, 10 in Quesnel, and four in Cranbrook. The pilot led to some minor changes to the survey, which were updated in both the print and online versions. Following the pilot, the survey was officially launched on March 10, 2020, with a preliminary end date scheduled for May 15, 2020.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on survey data collection

Unfortunately, the March 2020 economic shutdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the survey data collection. As a result of the pandemic, the survey questionnaire was revised to include COVID-19 as a reason for displacement (see the final version of the survey in Appendix A of the *Second Annual Report* document prepared by SRDC). Most importantly, however, survey respondent recruitment and data collection were significantly more challenging due to restrictions to in-person meetings in the targeted communities. The original recruitment strategy involved in-person approaches, such as engaging displaced workers through job fairs or employment service centres. Likewise, data collection required in-person interviews for completing the survey. These in-person meetings were simply not possible due to the COVID-19 restrictions.

Despite these challenges, the project partners decided to continue data collection, keeping in mind that the safety of the survey administrators and the respondents was of utmost priority. LOCs were required to adapt to pandemic safety protocols, shifting to telephone surveying for the most part and conducting in-person interviewing when it was permitted and safe to do so. The closing date for the survey was extended by the project team to October 16, 2020 to maximize response rates.

Interviews with displaced workers

The follow-up interviews with displaced workers were intended to provide a richer, qualitative understanding of some of the key areas of the survey research. Interviews were conducted individually with six displaced workers who had completed the survey and indicated their willingness to participate in a follow-up interview. Survey responses were used to select interviewees with a diversity of experience in terms of geography, demographic characteristics, industries, and time spent in the workforce.

Interviewees were contacted between November 2020 and January 2021 and were reminded of the survey, the survey topics, and that they agreed to be contacted for a follow-up interview. To qualify for the follow-up interview, the displaced workers could be currently employed or unemployed but still actively looking for a new job. This was confirmed with interviewees before scheduling the phone interview. Respondents were also offered a gift card as an honorarium.

Interviews were conducted in a structured manner, lasting approximately 30 minutes. The purpose of the interviews was to provide further understanding of the topics covered in the survey. The interview protocol was customized for each interviewee, using their survey data to make the interview questions contextually relevant to respondents. The interviews covered a deeper understanding of their previous employment history, their current job search experience, as well as their interest in training and improving their Essential Skills, and their experience

with employment and support services. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix B of the *Second Annual Report*.

Of the six interviews completed, five interviewees were unemployed and looking for work and one interviewee indicated that they were employed, but that their work had been put on hold due to COVID-19 and they were looking for work in the meantime.

Key findings

The following were some of the key findings from the survey and interviews of displaced workers.

- **LES needs:** There was a difference between the skills that displaced workers needed to improve compared to the skills they *wanted* to improve. Many respondents acknowledged their need to improve their skills; however, fewer were interested in actually improving those skills. This was the case for all the Essential Skills except for technology. Across all LES, respondents also tended to show the greatest interest in improving workplace-associated skills, such as use of technology and job-relevant software, speaking up for on the job problem-solving, and reading workplace instruction manuals.

- **Digital skills needs:** Displaced workers who completed the survey indicated that they were most interested in improving their technology skills and specifically their use of job-related software. The interviewees explained that this interest primarily stemmed from their understanding that all jobs now require some form of these skills and people with technology skills are more likely to get hired.

- **Training:** There was a high acknowledgement among survey respondents of the helpfulness of training, as well as input on the types of training that would be useful. However, there was lower reporting of actual uptake of training and some disinterest in training. This may reflect the difficulty engaging this population in training unless it is tailored specifically to their needs or addresses the barriers they face when accessing training. Those who had been re-employed since displacement were more likely to have taken training and the most common training taken was for certifications and tickets.

- **Barriers:** Most of the displaced workers who completed the survey identified multiple barriers to accessing training. The most common barriers to training were (1) finances, including cost of tuition, books or supplies, or loss of income while training and (2) availability of training. This suggested that the LES training delivered in the beta-test phase of the project should offer greater availability of free or affordable training to eliminate the top barriers identified by displaced workers in the survey.

- **Supports:** Most survey respondents identified the need for additional supports. Key supports identified extended beyond education to areas such as job search skills, financial skills, work experience, transportation, and mental health supports. This suggested that the beta tests developed in the project's next phase should consider additional supports that extend beyond the content of LES-based educational training.

More detailed findings can be found in the *Second Annual Report*.

PHASE 2 – BETA-TEST PROJECTS

Scope and purpose of beta-test projects

The overall goal of the beta-test phase of the project was to uncover and disseminate evidence-based LES support, training models, and promising practices that can inform the development of programs and models to improve the employability of displaced workers across Canada. The beta-test projects can be viewed as trial or experimental interventions or projects, which may be refined or scaled up pending the level of success and lessons learned through the evaluation. Thus, the beta-test initiatives were intended to be purposefully small in terms of the numbers of target learners, with the potential to be scaled up to a full pilot study if deemed successful.

A total of eleven literacy organizations were selected by Decoda through a competitive process to receive funding to conduct a beta test of an innovative LES project for displaced workers in their communities. These sites were located across Canada as follows (see Figure 1):

- ***BC (7 sites)***
    - Fort Nelson: Fort Nelson Community Literacy Society
    - Fraser Lake: Autumn Services Society
    - Líl'wat First Nation/Statimc Territory (near Pemberton): Capilano University
    - Gold River: Campbell River Literacy Association
    - Kootenays: Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy
    - Quesnel: Literacy Quesnel Society
    - North Vancouver Island: Mount Waddington Family Literacy Society
- ***AB (1 site)*** Lethbridge: Lethbridge Public Library
- ***SK (1 site)*** Coronach: Palliser Regional Library
- ***ON (2 sites)***
    - Belleville/Trenton area: Community Learning Alternatives
    - Chatham: Adult Language and Learning

Figure 1 Beta-test site locations

Beta-test descriptions – British Columbia

The following provides a brief description of the each of the beta-test projects.

Workplace Skills in the Basin and Boundary – Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy (CBAL)

The Workplace Skills in the Basin and Boundary (WSBB) beta-test project aimed to address the need for people who are unemployed or underemployed to upgrade their workplace and essential skills. The Basin and Boundary regions in southeastern BC are populated with numerous small communities that have been affected by mill closures and layoffs, a significant loss of tourism, and layoffs in the oil patch in Alberta as many residents are remote workers.

The original beta test was to be offered via one-to-one support and in small groups, with in-person and virtual delivery based on initial feedback from learners and partners. However, due to challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as other challenges related to recruitment, the beta test was modified to include three "Lunch & Learn" workshops offered weekly to Canadian newcomers in a group format both in person and virtually with options to

attend over lunch hour or in the evening. The topic areas included: working with others, Canadian employment laws, and workplace communication. The workshops incorporated PowerPoint presentations, small group discussions, Q & A, and easy to understand material (for more information click here).

The Autumn Services "YOU" Project – Autumn Services Society

Fraser Lake is a community which sits geographically in the centre of the BC on the lands of the Nadleh Whut'en and the Stellat'en First Nation. The village population is approximately 1,000, with a draw of 2,000 from the surrounding area. It is a two-hour drive from Prince George. The Endako Molybdenum Mine opened in 1965, but in 2014 following a 260-million-dollar expansion, it stopped production citing catastrophic losses in the markets. Within months, 450 employees were laid off. The small community lost many of its retail businesses as a result.

Autumn Services Society operates a community drop-in centre and experienced a significant increase in the number of people coming to the centre for assistance with technology use, job searches, resume and cover letter preparation, mobile device use, document preparation and filing, online form submissions, permit applications, licensing processes, and job-seeking preparation. The Autumn Services YOU Project provided the opportunity for community members to learn digital literacy skills, gain self-confidence, and become better suited candidates for jobs that become available in the local area. It also helped learners to upgrade their skills in preparation for employment, further their education, or pursue apprenticeship or certificate programs (for more information click here).

Technology and Personal Skills Project – Fort Nelson Community Literacy Society

Fort Nelson is a small, remote community along the Alaska Highway in northeastern BC with a population of approximately 3500. The area includes Fort Nelson First Nation and the neighbouring Prophet River First Nation. The town has been in steady economic decline for the past twelve years, with the initial closure of two main lumber mills and the eventual and continuing decline of the oil and gas industry. It has shrunk in population by about fifty per cent and has seen many social and community issues arise as a result of the poor economy. With a new pellet plant being built, Fort Nelson is seeing the first sign of economic activity in over a decade. Job opportunities will be available for community members and there is a need to prepare and to address some core individual issues, including skill sets and confidence.

The Technology and Personal Skills project addressed the whole learner. It focused on job preparedness and personal learning, offering digital literacy training, employment skills, and workplace safety tickets. There was dedicated time spent on social-emotional learning, mindfulness, and personal development for healing and self worth. The project addressed not

only practical skills and training, but the foundational issues that often hold individuals back in their pursuits. The project was holistic and individualized; it was a blend of learner-centred approach and small group training that touches on all aspects of the learners' needs (for more information click here).

Shaping the Future of a Rural Community through Improved Access to Technology – Campbell River Literacy Association

Located on Vancouver Island, 88 km northwest of Campbell River and at the end of the pavement of Highway 28, there is a beautiful gem of a town called Gold River. While Gold River was traditionally a resource community, it has been transitioning to become a tourism destination for 20 years. As a rural and remote community with a population of about 1500, Gold River has limited capacity and a lack of training opportunities for those workers who need to pivot their employment to be able to continue to live there.

The town recently received access to high-speed internet, which has opened opportunities and allowed local service providers to deliver online programming. The Displaced Workers project established a community technology/learning space for all citizens to access as they work together to diversify their resource-based economy. The key training related to this project included:

- Accessibility and basic digital literacy training (Campbell River and Gold River Literacy Societies)
- Essential and Workplace skills training (WorkBC – North Island Employment Foundation) (for more information click here).

Fundamentals of Community-based Business for Indigenous Communities and Beyond – Capilano University

Mount Currie is a First Nation reserve located two and half hours north of Vancouver. Mount Currie is currently home to 1300 Líl'wat. There is a need among the Líl'wat to create small business/self-employment opportunities. With an 18 per cent unemployment rate (2016 Census), and few employment opportunities, individuals leave their community for work. While employment opportunities exist in Pemberton (17 km) and Whistler (50 km), adequate safe transportation is a significant barrier. Individuals with low literacy and numeracy levels often cycle through low wage jobs without opportunities for advancement. Self-employment creates opportunities for flexible schedules to balance multi-generational family obligations and attending community and ceremonial events.

This project supported learners' goals for self-employment, working within the community, building capacity within the Nation, having flexible schedules to balance multi-generational family obligations, and participating in employment that grows and gives back to the community. The project took place at the Ts'zil Learning Centre and worked with individuals who have a home business or a desire to create a business. Through an Indigenous lens, the project worked with the whole person. It included strategies for dealing with stress and anxiety and supported learners' learning readiness by developing their literacy, numeracy, and digital skills, alongside engagement in entrepreneurial training. Learners gained skills to start small businesses or ladder into high-level entrepreneurship or small business programs (for more information click here).

Driver Education Preparation Project (DEPP) – Literacy Quesnel Society

Quesnel is a city of about 23,000 in central BC, between Williams Lake and Prince George. It was a forest industry town, but with mill closures and industry slow downs, the economy is diversifying. Literacy Quesnel and WorkBC have observed an increasing interest from clients wanting to obtain different levels of driving licenses because the licenses introduce an array of job opportunities, such as working for the City of Quesnel, the local road maintenance company, logging and mining companies, delivery companies, and even School District 28, as the demand for bus drivers increases.

The Driver Education Preparation Project (DEPP) helped learners understand the content they will need to know to complete the driver learners' test. Many adults who are not working, or who have been displaced from industry-based jobs, are interested in earning a Class 3 or a Class 1 driver's license, but their ability to successfully complete the written test is hampered by their low literacy skills, comprehension skills, inexperience with test writing, computer literacy, or a combination of these factors. Most of the adults in DEPP had their Class 5 license, but in some instances, DEPP also helped learners prepare for that test. The project focused on small group learning in response to COVID-19 restrictions. This allowed for group work, skill building, discussion, role play, and exploration of the knowledge needed to pass the test (for more information click here).

Connect4Work: Digital Literacy for Displaced Workers – Mount Waddington Family Literacy Society

The 100-year-old Neucel Cellulose pulp mill in Port Alice went into production curtailment in 2015, eventually closing completely in 2019 and leaving more than 400 North Vancouver Island employees out of work. The remote area, three hours north of the nearest city of Campbell River, has very limited employment opportunities and the mill's ancient equipment and lack of technology left about two thirds of the union employees without job-related transferrable skills.

About 75 per cent of those workers are over age 40 and about two thirds have a significant digital literacy gap that hinders their ability to search for and apply for work. There are currently no reliable, regular digital literacy programs in the region.

The Connect4Work digital literacy beta-test project was intended for workers who have been displaced from their jobs to have hands-on learning in a small class environment – eight students each in the towns of Port Hardy, Port McNeill, and Port Alice. The project introduced workers to using technology to:

- Look for and apply for work
- Access online services
- Pursue continuing education
- Connect to family and community.

Students started from the basics – turning on a device, using a mouse or mousepad, understanding technology vocabulary – and build on their skills over six weeks. The course covered Internet searches and safety, creating basic documents, using email, using online learning platforms like Zoom, and an introduction to a variety of online resources from government and health services to banking and library services (for more information click here).

Beta-test descriptions – Alberta

Moving Forward: New Opportunities, New Lives – Lethbridge Public Library

Moving Forward: New Opportunities, New Lives took place in Lethbridge, a city of about 100,000 in southern Alberta. The project focused on culture and expectations in the Canadian workplace and the essential skills required, including document use and computer skills. This no cost, online training helped workers who have been displaced move forward as they participate in new opportunities acquiring the skills they lack in securing and retaining employment. The learners – from Lethbridge and area, who were primarily energy sector workers as well as farm workers affected by drought – will need these skills to be competitive in today's market.

Each learner completed a skills assessment and participated in a discussion of the workplace, employment history, and goals. Project resources and breakout groups were matched to learners' skill levels. Weekly, they joined Computer Basics, Word, Excel, or a numeracy class to further improve these skills. In addition, those who required literacy skills improvement were paired with Read on Adult Literacy & Learning volunteer tutors for up to three hours weekly. Upon

completion of Moving Forward, all learners continued to work with their tutors, if they desired to do so.

As securing and retaining employment is the overall goal, local organizations that could offer new learning opportunities were scheduled to speak to learners. There was also an opportunity to meet some major local employers (for more information click here).

Beta-test descriptions – Saskatchewan

Surviving Downsizing: Reimagining Yourself in a Post-layoff World – Palliser Regional Library

The Poplar Valley Mine and SaskPower's Coronach Power Plant were closing over the next three years and 300 employees were to be out of work (area population 1,498). The project proposal for in-person training was based on the mine and power plant closures, but the timeline for the power plant closure continued to be delayed. This delay, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, required a change of approach and a new way to find and connect with displaced workers.

While some organizations in the region focused on helping learners to develop their job preparation and entrepreneurship skills, there was a gap in programming related to soft skills. None of the organizations providing LES or employment services focused on soft skills and the transferability of them for job opportunities.

Using ABC Life Literacy's UP Skills for Work curriculum, the project provided virtual synchronous training to learners. Each learner completed a skills assessment with the instructor at the beginning of the program, which helped them to identify which soft skills to focus on. Learners refreshed and gained key employability and life skills, such as stress management, time management, confidence, adaptability, and motivation, and identified how these are relevant to the workplace. There was one training session for each individual soft skill, but learners were also provided with additional resources and learning opportunities for future development. The project aimed to help learners not only understand how their existing and new skills could be applied in the workplace, but also how to describe and communicate these skills in a job application (for more information click here).

Beta-test descriptions – Ontario

Next Steps Project – Community Learning Alternatives

The Next Steps project was delivered in the Bay of Quinte Region of Hastings County, a cluster of small and medium-size communities between Toronto and Ottawa, Ontario. Community Learning Alternatives (CLA) provides adult upgrading in Belleville, Trenton, and Madoc; also drawing learners from the surrounding rural areas. The area has experienced many large manufacturing plant closures in the past few years, with more looming. Although new plants have opened, the skills needed are not always a good match with the skills of job seekers.

Workers who have been displaced often struggle to identify and describe their transferable skills, leaving a lack of confidence to move on to other employment. Next Steps aimed to help these workers understand their current skills and how these skills make them good candidates for other employment opportunities. With virtual delivery, Next Steps allowed CLA to support learners from across the region. In small groups, learners explored their skills and values while building confidence in working with others. They completed soft skills certification and developed a portfolio to illustrate their strengths. Individually, they brushed up on relevant skills and learned new ones in areas of communication, numeracy, and digital literacy. The project aimed to increase learners' knowledge of community supports and understanding of labour market information for job search, while learning the value of their existing and newly gained skills to potential employers (for more information click here).

Women Displaced from Work – Adult Language and Learning

The Women Displaced from Work beta-test project took place in the community of Chatham-Kent, located in southwestern Ontario. Chatham Kent is a smaller/rural community comprised of many small towns throughout 2,458 square kilometers.

During this pandemic there has been an increase of women being displaced from employment. Many have children and need to be home as they were not the primary income earner. Others were in retail, hospitality, and the food industry, which experienced a large decrease in business and in some cases, permanent closures. This disparity in male versus female roles has widened the gap exponentially everywhere.

This project aimed to assist displaced women to build greater self esteem, self worth, and independence, and increased ability to make their own decisions. The project focused on helping women to develop the necessary skills to become leaders in our community; to have financial independence; to increase their ability to earn an income; and to enjoy equal access to employment and education through improved LES (for more information click here).

Beta-test evaluation approach

Evaluation questions

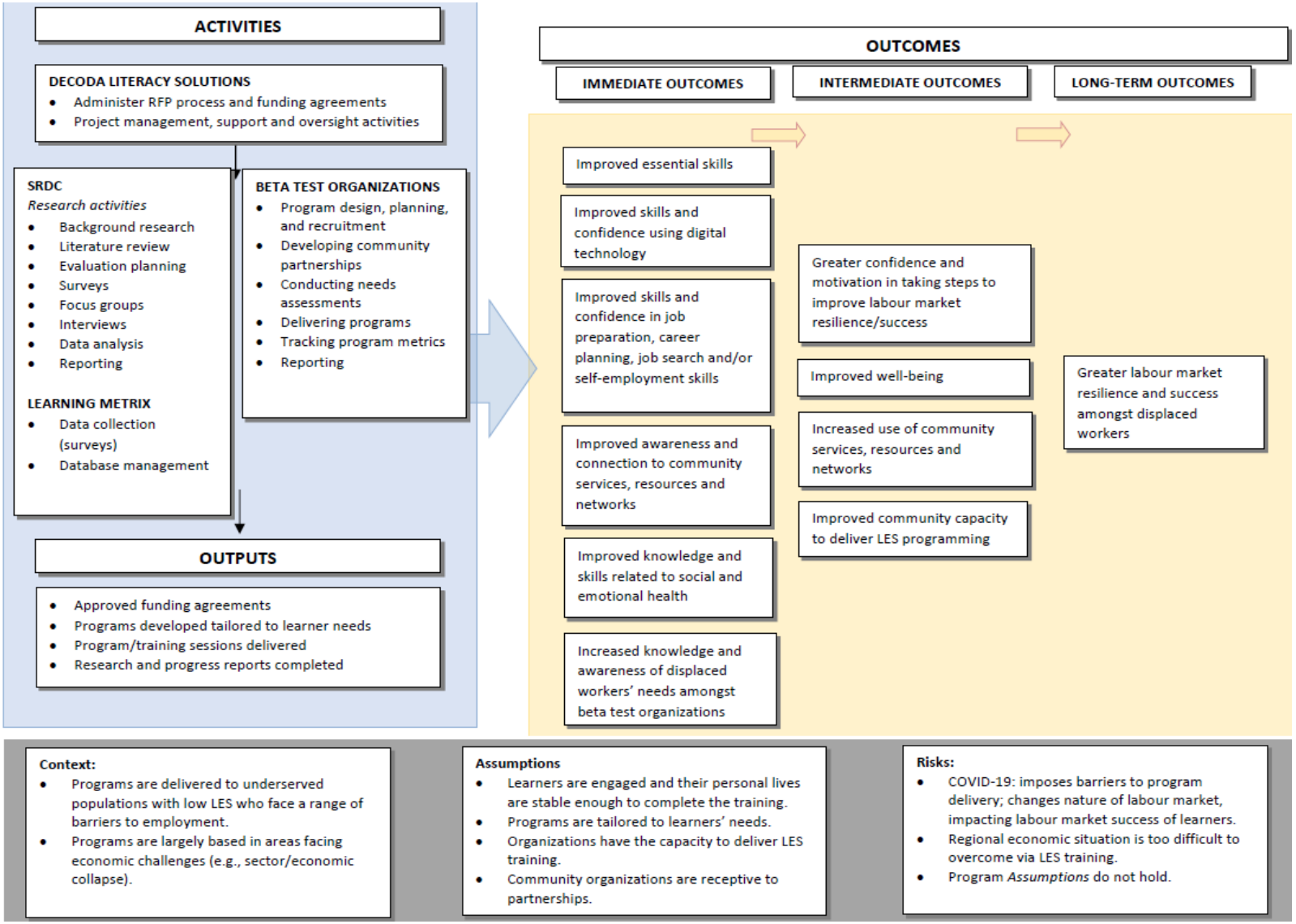
The evaluation of the beta-test projects aimed to answer the following key questions related to program implementation, program outcomes, and overarching or cross-cutting themes (see Appendix A and B of the *Beta-test Evaluation Framework* document prepared by SRDC for detailed implementation and outcome questions, and corresponding indicators and data sources).

- Were the beta-test projects implemented as intended? Key themes investigated in the implementation research included assessing approaches and levels of success related to:
    - Recruitment, participation, and engagement;
    - Program design and delivery;
    - Establishment of community partnerships and capacity development; and
    - Support provided to beta-test organizations.
- To what extent have the immediate, intermediate, and long-term outcomes been achieved?
    - Immediate outcomes focused on increases in skill level, knowledge and awareness, and connection to community services/resources;
    - Intermediate outcomes focused on improvements in confidence and actions toward improving employability (e.g., seeking work, enrolling in training); and
    - Long-term outcomes focused on improved labour market resilience and success (e.g., improved employment status).
- Were there any unintended or unexpected outcomes?
- What were the main factors influencing achievement and non-achievement of outcomes?
- What are the lessons learned, promising practices, and recommendations related to the achievement of outcomes for the DWLES project?

Logic model

The logic model outlines program activities and outcomes across all of the 11 beta-test projects based on individual theories of change that were co-created with each of the beta-test organizations (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 Beta-tests logic model



The process for developing the logic model was iterative and involved several steps. First, preparation interviews were conducted with all the beta-test organization leads to obtain an understanding of their programs, the learners they intended to recruit, and the program outcomes they expected to achieve. SRDC then worked collaboratively with the beta-test organizations to help them develop a theory of change specifically for their program. The preparation interviews and theories of change, in addition to information from the RfP process and consultations with Decoda and beta-test leads, were critical to informing the development of the preliminary evaluation framework.

There were a few noteworthy challenges in designing the evaluation framework:

- Despite a great degree of commonality across the interventions in their provision of LES training, there were substantive diversity in focus areas, as well as differences in learner needs. For instance, one program had a strong focus on helping newcomers adjust to Canadian workplace culture, whereas others focused on topics such as obtaining a truck driving license or social-emotional health. The diversity posed challenges in "rolling up" their program outcomes into an overarching project logic model.

- The timing of the implementation of the beta-test projects further complicated the evaluation design. Some beta-test organizations had finished one cohort of learners prior to other organizations having finalized their project design. This made it challenging to "finalize" an evaluation framework prior to the start of data collection for some of the beta-test sites. Accordingly, this situation necessitated a flexible and iterative approach to the development of the evaluation framework design and data collection tools.

Beta-test theories of change

Each beta-test organization worked the SRDC research team to develop a theory of change for their project (see Appendix C of the *Second Annual Report* for an example of Community Learning Alternative's theory of change). The theories of change served three purposes. First, they provided SRDC researchers with a detailed understanding of the outcomes associated with each beta test (including which Essential Skills each beta test would focus on), which helped to refine the evaluation framework. Second, they provided a snapshot of the beta test at the outset of its implementation so that the SRDC team could better understand if and how the beta test had changed during implementation. Finally, the theory of change helped each of the organizations understand the logic of their beta test and how each activity contributed to the desired goal of the project. It should be noted that several beta-test organizations reported that while they found the process of developing their theory of change initially challenging, it was eventually rewarding, as it helped them refine and understand their beta test.

Project outputs

The project activities resulted in key tangible outputs for the DWLES project, including approximately 11 beta-test projects developed and tailored to learner needs, which were delivered across 11 different sites in Canada. Other tangible outputs included approved funding applications and research and progress reports, including an overall research report for the project.

Project outcomes

The outcomes for the project were generally divided into immediate, intermediate, and long-term outcomes. The key **immediate** outcomes included improved knowledge, awareness, and skills. For example, it was expected that learners would improve their Essential Skills and digital literacy skills, as well as employment-related skills (e.g., job prep, career planning, etc.). The evaluation also measured outcomes related to the beta-test organizations. In the short-term, as was expected that beta-test organizations would obtain an increased understanding of the needs of displaced workers in their region.

The **intermediate** outcomes arose or extended from the improved knowledge, awareness and skills obtained through the beta-test projects. For learners, it was expected that they would experience increased confidence and motivation in taking steps to improve their employability (e.g., looking for work, applying for further training) and making increased use of community services, resources, and networks. Furthermore, learners were expected to report an increase in well-being as they acquired new skills and became more hopeful about their job prospects. In the intermediate term, beta-test organizations were expected to have improved their capacity to deliver LES training and to have increased or strengthened their partnerships with other service providers in their region.

The **long-term** outcome of the beta-test projects was identified as greater labour market resilience and success amongst displaced workers. This was expected to be evidenced through beta-test learners' increased employment or enrolment in further training—although it was not certain whether this would be captured within the project's follow-up period. All of the immediate and intermediate outcomes were viewed as contributing to this overarching outcome as well.

Evaluation data collection approach

There were six data collection methods included in the evaluation framework:

1. **Demographic and implementation-related data inputted in the displaced workers database**[4]

   Each beta-test organization was required to collect and input basic data into a database that was specifically designed for this project. Examples of this type of data includes learner background information, as well as program information, such as the number of hours of training.

   Data analysis considerations

   - The following database data was used as part of the evaluation analysis:
     - Demographic information (from the Learners file);
     - Assessment data (from Information Technology, Communication, and Participation files); and
     - Future planned activities at program exit (from General Exit file).
   - The General Exit data base file (information inputted at the training exit point) was deemed most valid to calculate the total number of learners, as this file captured those who had completed the program. A total of 131 learners were included in the exit database file.

2. **Pre- and post-assessment of Essential Skills**

   Each beta-test organization was responsible for conducting a pre- and post-assessment of each learner's Essential Skills using the BC Provincial Benchmarking System and inputting this data into the database. The database includes assessments for the following skills: reading, writing, math, communications, IT, and participation. Only those Essential Skills associated with the beta test, and those identified in the individual theories of change, were assessed.

[4] See Appendix C of the *Beta Test Evaluation Framework* document for a list of the variables collected in the database.

Data analysis considerations

- There was some variability in the completion of assessments among the beta-test projects – some beta-test sites either did not complete or only partially completed assessments for their learners.
- Some of the assessments were not applicable to all programs, so some programs either did not complete the assessment, or they were excluded at the analysis stage to ensure only valid cases were included.
- It should be noted that there was a great amount of diversity in terms of how assessments were conducted across the individual beta-test projects. However, all projects used the BC Provincial Benchmarking System as a standardized approach for inputting final measurement results.

3. **Post-beta test survey**[5]

Each learner was asked to complete a survey at the end of their participation in the beta test. The survey could either be completed online or by paper. The beta-test organizations were encouraged to support each learner while they completed the survey to ensure that they could understand each question. The purpose of the survey was to collect individual responses related to program outcomes, as well as areas for program improvement. The survey was designed to be as consistent as possible across all the 11 beta-test projects, while including additional questions that were relevant to each site's particular intended outcomes as identified in their theory of change.

Data analysis considerations

- A total of 75 exit surveys were completed, ranging from two to 18 completions per beta test with an average of seven per site.
- As per the approach taken with the assessment data, programs were excluded from the analysis of questions if it did not apply to the respective program (e.g., Palliser and Quesnel were excluded from questions on digital technology because their programs did not include a digital component).
- Sub-group analysis was not conducted for the exit survey due to its small sample size.
- The original intention was to link the survey and database data based on name to be able to conduct subgroup analysis on survey data for different groups (e.g., gender, etc.).

[5] See Appendix D of the *Beta Test Evaluation Framework* document for the post-intervention survey.

However, 15 of the 66 exit survey respondents (23 per cent) could not be linked to the database due to the following: some respondents chose to complete the survey anonymously and some respondents who had completed the survey were not yet, or had not been, entered into the database. It is also possible that the beta site organizations did not enter data on all learners, which may account for some discrepancies. Further, names that respondents entered on the survey were not always consistent with the names used in the database.

4. **Post-beta test learner focus group**[6]

Virtual focus groups were conducted for each cohort of learners at the end of the beta test. Similar to the survey, the purpose of the focus groups was to collect data on program outcomes and areas for improvement. The focus groups placed greater emphasis on the specific program context and activities of each respective beta-test project, while still including general themes that were consistent across all the beta-test projects.

Data analysis considerations

- A total of 17 focus groups were conducted across 21 beta-test cohorts.
- It should be noted that some focus groups were more successful than others in engaging learners depending on the format for how they were conducted online. The focus groups were much more successful when the learners connected through individual computers, compared to when learners were in a classroom setting sharing one computer as it was more challenging to have an engaging conversation.

5. **Follow-up learner survey**[7]

Follow-up surveys were administered to learners approximately three-months after their beta-test completion. SRDC was responsible for developing the invitation and reminder emails, and the beta-test organizations were responsible for contacting learners to complete the survey. The purpose of the follow-up survey was to measure post-beta test activities and changes in employment status, and to capture longer-term outcomes of the beta-test projects.

6 See Appendix E of the *Beta Test Evaluation Framework* document for the post-intervention focus group protocol.

7 See Appendix F of the *Beta Test Evaluation Framework* document for the follow-up survey.

Data analysis considerations

- A total of 32 follow-up surveys where completed, ranging from 0 to 10 completions per beta test with an average of 6. Given the small number of completions, findings related to the follow-up survey should be taken with caution.
- Sub-group analysis was not conducted for the follow-up survey due to low sample size.

6. **Interviews with beta-test project staff**[8]

Interviews with beta-test project staff were conducted upon completion of the beta-test projects (e.g., facilitators, program managers, executive directors). The purpose of these interviews was to better understand the beta-test context and what was learned through the delivery of the project.

Data analysis considerations

- A total of 11 interviews were completed.

[8] See Appendix G of the *Beta Test Evaluation Framework* document for the staff interview protocol.

KEY FINDINGS RELATED TO LEARNERS

The following section outlines the key findings of the beta-test projects in terms of learner outcomes. It includes four sections: 1) learner participation, including a description of learners across all beta-test sites; 2) learner engagement and satisfaction; 3) learner skills-based outcomes; and 4) learner well-being outcomes. Each section also includes highlights of innovative and/or promising practices that emerged from the beta-test projects.[9]

LEARNER PARTICIPATION

In order to understand who took part in the beta tests, the participation rates for each beta test and the factors affecting participation rates, as well the demographics of learners, are described below. Table 1 outlines the number of learners who took part in and completed a beta test. There was a total of 135 learners across the 11 beta-test projects, with a range of four to 24 learners in each program.

Table 1 Number of learners by beta-test project

Beta-test project and lead organization	Number of learners
Connect4Work: Digital Literacy for Displaced Workers / Mount Waddington Family Literacy Society	14
Driver Education Preparation Program / Literacy Quesnel Society	17
Gathering Together: Introduction to Small Business Startup within Indigenous Communities / Capilano University	12
Moving Forward: New Opportunities, New Lives / Lethbridge Public Library	20
Next Steps Project / Community Learning Alternatives	19
Shaping the Future of a Rural Community through Improved Access to Technology / Campbell River Literacy Association	6
Surviving Downsizing: Reimagining Yourself in a Post-layoff World / Palliser Regional Library	4

[9] More details on the example promising practices can be found in the individual beta test reports.

Beta-test project and lead organization	Number of learners
Technology and Personal Skills Project / Fort Nelson Community Literacy Society	10
The "You" Program / Autumn Services Fraser Lake	5
Women Helping Other Women / Adult Languages and Learning	4
Workplace Skills in the Basin and Boundary / Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy	24
Total	135

Source: Database; General Exit file.

Factors affecting participation rates

While the beta-test projects were purposefully small in terms of the number of learners, participation rates were lower than expected across most beta-test sites due to challenges with learner recruitment. Multiple factors contributed to recruitment challenges, including:

- The COVID-19 pandemic caused many programs to switch from in-person to virtual. For those that were virtual, this meant that learners had to have access to, and sufficient digital skills to use, the necessary technology (i.e., computer and internet). For those that were in-person, some individuals did not participate due to their concerns about the transmission of the virus, and some were unable to participate due to vaccine mandates in place in some organizations.

- The pandemic also restricted the capacity in the learning spaces. For programs that remained in-person, this meant that they had to limit the number of learners to fit with capacity restrictions.

- Many beta-test staff were unable to recruit learners in-person due to the pandemic. Job fairs were cancelled, local gathering places were closed where staff could connect informally with community members, and many supports and services that offered in-person drop-ins switched to online. This reduced the opportunities for beta-test staff to talk to potential learners and the ability to market the programs through word-of-mouth.

- Since many beta-test organizations were trying out new programming, this meant that they were also typically trying to engage new groups of learners that they did not have previous relationships with or did not have strong relationships with. With the shorter timeframe of many of the programs (e.g., a few months), alongside the above-mentioned factors related to the pandemic, this created challenges in building new relationships with potential learners, as these often take time to build, especially when not doing so in-person.

Recruitment challenges were a common concern across the beta-test organizations; however, some beta-test leads (i.e., staff from each organization who were primarily responsible for developing and/or delivering the program) described strategies that they found particularly helpful for increasing their participation rates, as described in Box 1 below.

Box 1: Promising practices for addressing recruitment challenges

1. Initiating an ongoing referral process with a well-established community partner.

- Example from Next Steps Training (Community Learning Alternatives): Given the focus of their beta-test project on transferable skills, Community Learning Alternatives was able to receive regular referrals of Ontario Works clients to participate in the program. The emphasis on transferable skills was important to Ontario Works, as clients are required to take part in activities that improve their skills and ability to find work. Next Steps was a natural fit as it helped learners identify and communicate how their skills were applicable in a variety of workplaces.

2. Establishing relationships with community members who would benefit from programming.

- Example from Gathering Together: Introduction to Small Business Startup within Indigenous Communities (Capilano University): With the program's focus on entrepreneurship, program staff were able to connect with specific individuals in the community who had previously shown an interest in entrepreneurship or business owners who could benefit from further developing their skills.

Description of beta-test learners

All beta-test projects had a common goal to provide training to underserved populations with low LES who face a range of barriers to employment. While the beta-test initiatives were developed to support a diversity of learners, the common thread was that all the sites focused on learners who had low LES, were unemployed or underemployed, and who faced a variety of challenges related to finding a job. This led to the project sites using a diverse range of definitions of displaced workers based on the characteristics of workers within their communities as well as other important historical and cultural factors within their communities. The following considerations emerged when interviewing the beta site leads about how they defined who is a displaced worker for the purposes of their programs:

- Colonialism is an important factor to consider in relation to displaced workers, given the ways in which it has caused many economic, infrastructure, social, and health inequities for Indigenous peoples;

- Workers who grew up in remote communities with limited access to technology have not had the opportunity to develop digital skills that are becoming essential to maintain their jobs;

- The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the need for digital skills in certain sectors, leading to some workers not having the time nor resources to develop the skills required for their changing their work environment; and

- Workers who were displaced by large employer shutdowns (i.e., mills, power plants, etc.) often move out of the community, which leads to the slowdown or closure of other businesses in the community that rely on the employees of the larger employers for business.

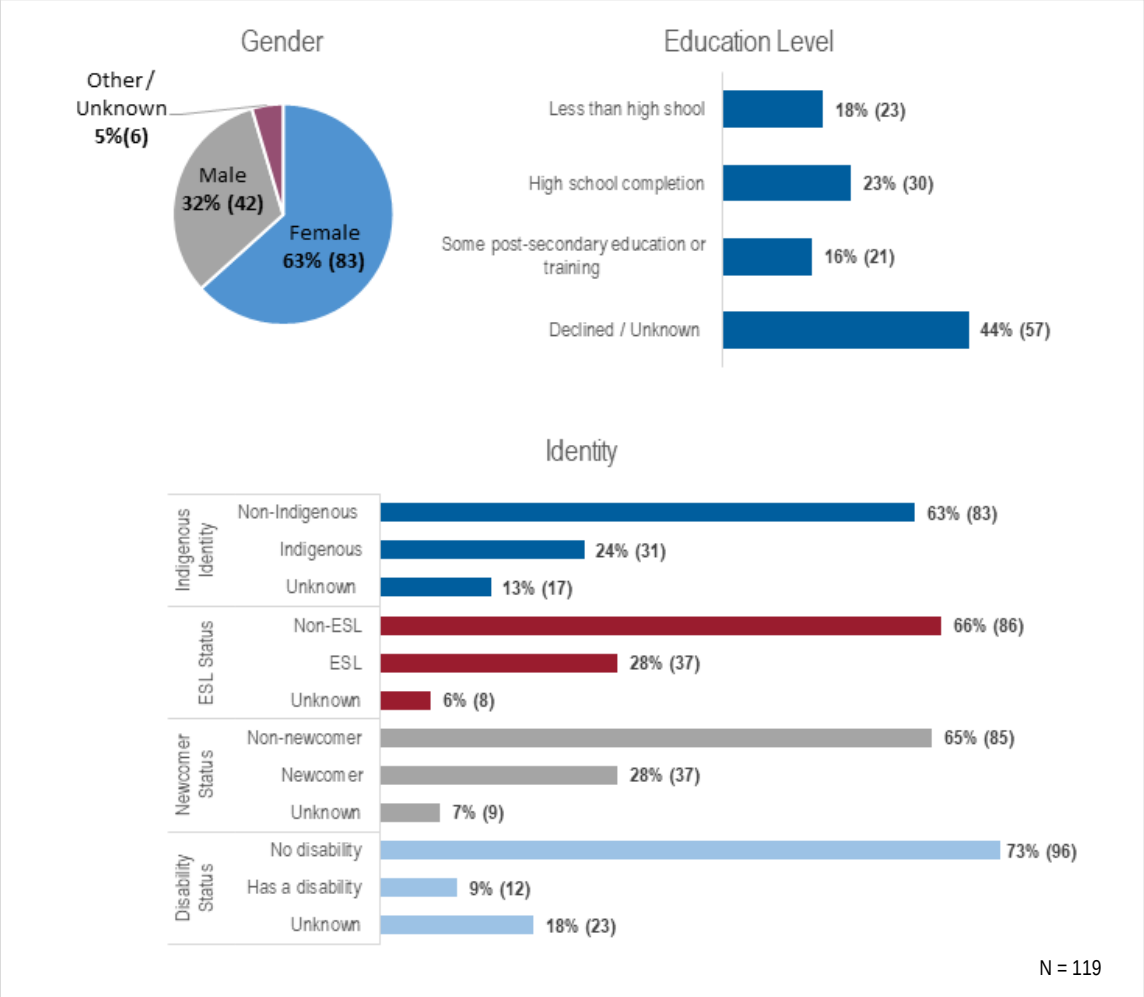
The profile of learners who took part in the beta-test projects sheds light on the different ways in which workers can become displaced, the various factors that keep individuals unemployed or underemployed, as well as the diversity of individuals who may benefit from LES and employment skills training. Figure 3 provides an overview of the basic demographic characteristics of all workers who participated in each of the beta-test site programs. It shows that:

- Almost two thirds of respondents were female (63 per cent);

- Approximately one third of respondents identified as Indigenous (32 per cent), just over one quarter of respondents identified as a newcomer (28 per cent), approximately one quarter stated that their first language was not English, indicating their ESL status (24 per cent), and nine per cent self-identified as a person with a disability(ies);

- In terms of education, almost one quarter of respondents had a high school diploma (23 per cent), while 18 per cent had not completed high school. Sixteen per cent had some post-secondary education or training.

Figure 3 Demographics



Source: Database; General Exit file.

There are several points to consider regarding the demographic characteristics of learners who engaged in the beta tests. First, some beta-test organizations focused on supporting specific equity-deserving groups of learners. For instance, one beta test was specifically developed for women, another specifically for Indigenous peoples, and two specifically for newcomers. Second, the majority of beta-test project staff, including both leads and facilitators, identified as female. The staff characteristics potentially could have had the unintended effect of more female learners engaging in the programs. Third, the shutdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately increased job layoffs among certain groups, including women, Indigenous peoples, people with disabilities (Holland, 2021), immigrants, and racialized people (Ng et al., 2021). These three factors, as well as the previously described factors related to recruitment challenges, underscore the importance of considering the environmental, social, and economic context that can affect learner recruitment and program participation.

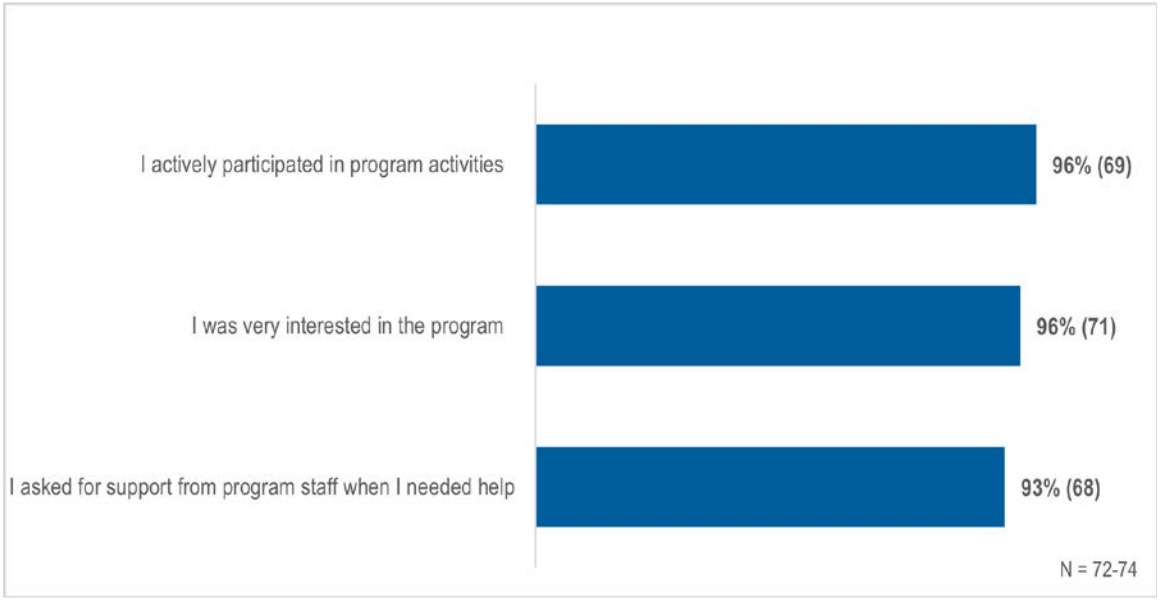
LEARNER ENGAGEMENT AND SATISFACTION

In both the surveys and focus groups, learners reported high levels of engagement and satisfaction, and the vast majority felt that their needs and expectations were met through the program (89 per cent). No learners stated that the program did not meet their needs.

Learner engagement

Beta-test learners were asked about their level of engagement in their beta test as part of the exit survey. Most respondents indicated that they actively participated in program activities (96 per cent), they were very interested in the program (96 per cent) and that they asked for support from program staff when they needed help (93 per cent) (see Figure 4).

Figure 4 Level of agreement that learners were interested and engaged in the program



Note: Reported percentages include "agree" and "strongly agree" responses combined.
Source: Exit survey.

In the focus groups, learners shared about their level of interest and engagement in the programs, as illustrated in the quote below from one of the learners.

> *"[The facilitator] takes the time to show you how to do it. And if you don't get it, she had patience to keep going. She makes you want to learn more, and* ***I want to keep going.****"*

Learners were also asked about the supports they needed and received to understand what contributed to their participation and engagement in the programs. About one third of exit survey respondents (32 per cent) highlighted *access to a computer/laptop/tablet* as a support that helped them participate in the program. This was the most common program support mentioned. There were a range of other supports mentioned by learners, though frequency counts for each were low (typically less than five). The following are a sampling of the types of additional supports mentioned that learners deemed helpful:

- Providing workbooks and learning materials, and making them accessible for diverse needs;
- The location where the program was offered (accessibility);
- Provision of food, such as lunch and dinner;
- Ability to participate online (via Zoom); and
- An approachable and accessible facilitator.

Focus group participants shared that they had enough supports to enable them to participate in the program. As indicated in the adjacent quote, the learner felt supported to participate in the program as a mother with a young child given the virtual class environment.

*"[I am] impressed with the flexibility of the program. **I can participate as a new mom with a young child at home**. The staff were so understanding and gave me a chance to be part of the program despite being unable to make some meetings and having to attend to child. I really appreciated it."*

Over two thirds (68 per cent) of exit survey respondents stated "none" when asked if there were any supports that they did not receive that would have been helpful, suggesting that most learners were provided with the supports necessary to engage and participate. Some learners (12 per cent) identified additional supports that they felt would have been helpful, such as childcare, financial support, access to a laptop, more support with program content in class, increased program length, and additional after class support.

Learner satisfaction

Learners were also asked if they were satisfied with the program and were encouraged to identify what contributed to the satisfaction.

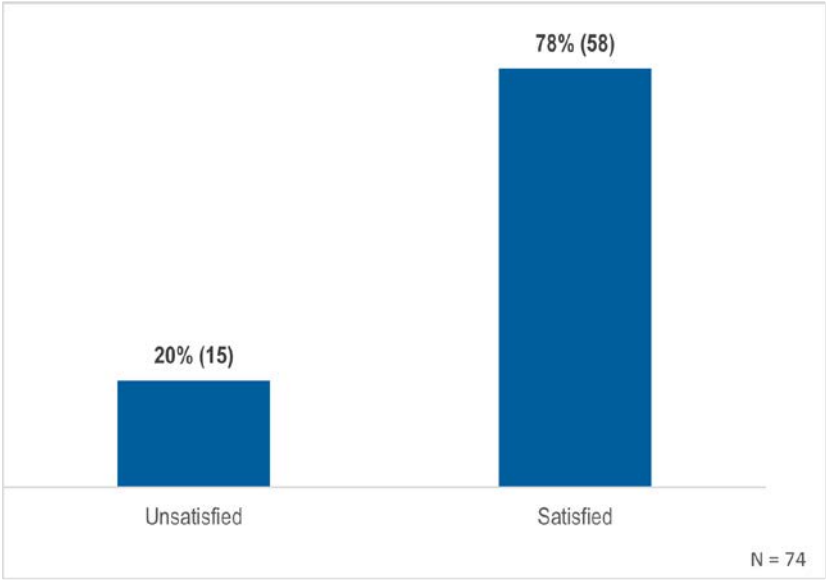
In the focus groups, many learners indicated their appreciation for various aspects of the programs, including the learning activities, program content, teaching methods, and learning environment. The quotes below provide examples of the teaching methods and program content that some learners particularly appreciated.

*"The examples of different businesses and what doesn't work well and what could work better. That was really helpful; **it was like storytelling**."*

*"I really appreciated the content of the program. It was **real-life content** that not only helped us with computer skills, but it was real-life."*

Similarly, in the survey, most (78 per cent) of learners stated that they were satisfied with the program; however, interestingly almost one fifth (20 per cent) stated some level of dissatisfaction (Figure 5).

Figure 5 Learner satisfaction with the program



Notes: Figure excludes neutral and non-valid responses. Response categories have been combined to address small samples sizes for some response categories: unsatisfied *(very unsatisfied* and *somewhat unsatisfied* combined*);* satisfied *(somewhat satisfied* and *very satisfied* combined*).*
Source: Exit survey.

This finding indicates that although learners appeared to recognize the value of the program, this did not always translate into overall satisfaction. It is not clear why some learners were dissatisfied; however, in the exit survey and focus groups some learners identified ways in which they thought the program could be improved, such as increasing program length; modifying and

editing learning materials; adding more content related to general mental health, mental health in the workplace, and job application preparation; and providing more opportunity for job application feedback. Overall, however, the exit surveys and focus groups indicate that there were high levels of interest, engagement, and satisfaction among learners with the beta-test projects.

Practices that contributed to learner engagement and satisfaction

The focus group findings, along with the findings from interviews with beta-test staff, illustrated several promising practices that contributed to high learner engagement and satisfaction (see Box 2).

Box 2: Promising practices for learner engagement and satisfaction

1. Using a range of learning activities to engage learners and encourage their participation.

Examples of this practice this included:
- Inviting guest speakers (e.g., a rep from the local library to discuss their resources and services)
- Conducting mock interviews (e.g., learners taking part in mock interviews with volunteers)
- Journaling (e.g., learners completed a daily journal to reflect on their learning and goals).

2. Ensuring that program content was relevant to learners and aligned with their interests.

Examples of this practice included:
- Doing activities relevant to learners' interests (e.g., creating grocery budgets in Google Sheets)
- Inviting guest speakers that reflected learners' community (e.g., local businesses).

3. Fostering a flexible learning environment to ensure learners could participate in a way that met their needs.

Examples of this practice included:
- Providing programming virtually and/or in-person
- Allocating time after class to help learners that needed additional support with the program content.

4. Providing a variety of supports for learners to reinforce their learning and engagement within and beyond the beta test.

Examples of this practice included:
- Providing meals for learners (e.g., having dinner together at the beginning of class)
- Creating comprehensive workbooks for learners to use in the future (e.g., on Google applications)
- Ensuring learners could access virtual programs (e.g., a pre-program session to set up Zoom).

LEARNERS' SKILLS-BASED OUTCOMES

As part of their design, each of the beta-test projects focused primarily on skills development to support the labour market resiliency and success of learners. The skills development components included specific LES training (i.e., oral communication, participation, and IT/digital skills) and skills development related to career planning and job searching. Assessment data from the learner database, as well as findings from the exit survey and learner focus groups, showed that most learners experienced gains in these skills after completing their programs.

It is important to note, however, that each beta-test project focused on different skills or different components of particular skills. For example, Literacy Quesnel Society's beta test (Driver Education Preparation Program) had a greater focus on developing aspects of learners' participation skills, such as organize, problem solve, and reflect, whereas Mount Waddington Family Literacy Society's beta test (Connect4Work) specifically focused on IT skills. Even for beta-test projects that focused on the same overall skill, such as IT/digital, there was diversity in the specific skills that they addressed. For example, Lethbridge Public Library (Moving Forward: New Opportunities, New Lives) and Community Learning Alternative's (Next Steps) beta-test projects both addressed career planning and job searching skill; however, Lethbridge Public Library's focused on building learners' knowledge of Canadian workplace culture and preparing for interviews, whereas Community Learning Alternative's had a greater focus on helping learners to understand and communicate their transferable skills to support their employability. Therefore, it is important to consider the diversity across the beta-test sites when reviewing the skills-based learner outcomes.

Literacy and essential skills

The LES that were the main focus of the beta-test projects were IT/digital, communication, and participation skills. As described in the methodology section, each skill domain is divided into subdomains that each include four levels with specific competencies expected of the learner at that level.[10]

Information technology and digital skills

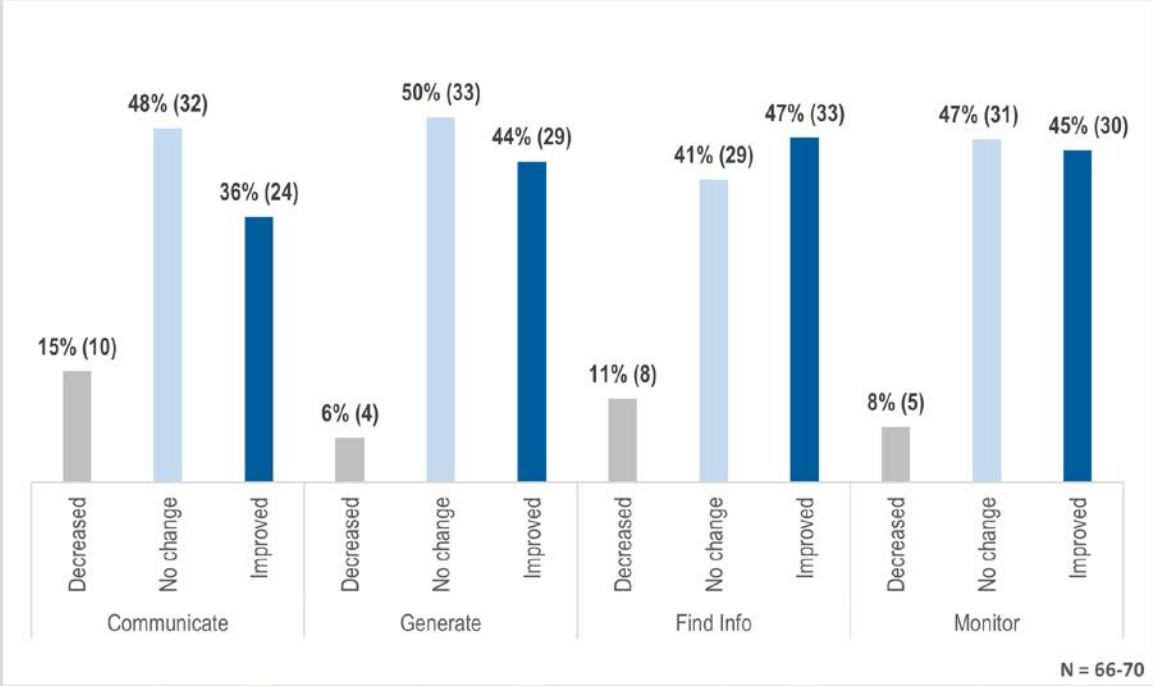
IT/digital training was the most common LES focus of the beta-test projects. All the beta-test projects include a digital component except for Literacy Quesnel Society and Palliser Regional Library; however, as described above, some beta-test projects provided more IT/digital training

[10] See Decoda Literacy Solution's information on benchmarks for further detail on measurement of these subdomains: https://decoda.ca/resources/adult-literacy-benchmarks/

then others. This predominant focus on IT-related training contributed to learners making substantial gains in IT skills across the beta-test projects, according to the IT assessment data as well as the exit survey and focus groups findings.

Learners' IT skills were assessed on four subdomains – communicate, generate, find information, and monitor – both prior to and at the end of the program. A comparison between the pre and post training results are shown in Figure 6, demonstrating that 36 per cent to 47 per cent of learners showed skill improvement, 41 per cent to 50 per cent experienced no change, and six per cent to 15 per cent experienced a skills decrease. The skills decrease could have resulted from learners and the facilitators having a better understanding of learners' skills level as the training progressed (i.e., that the learners' skill level was lower than they thought).

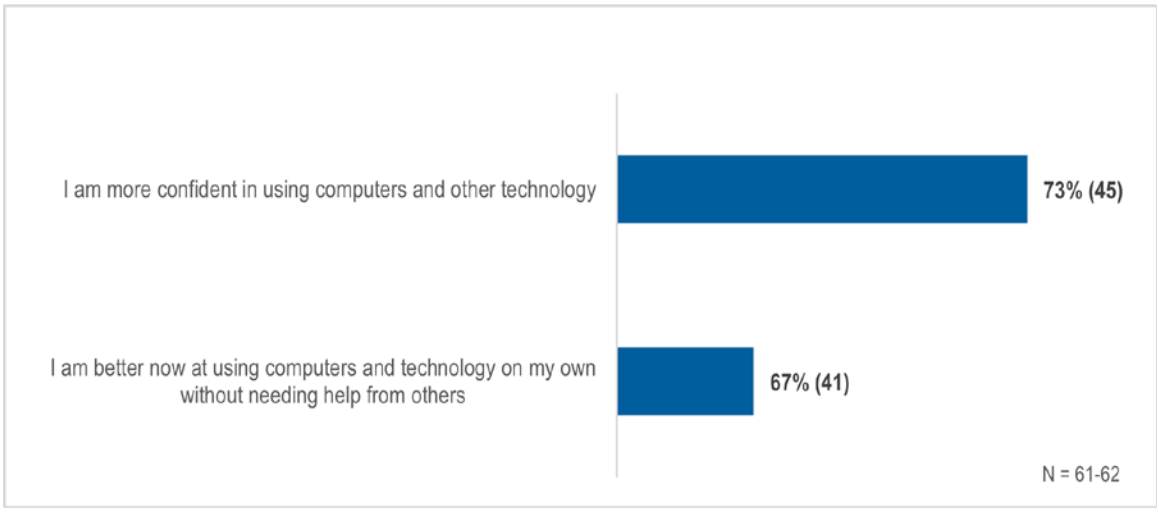
Figure 6 Information Technology: pre-post status change, by subdomain



Notes: All four skills levels combined. Palliser Regional Library and Literacy Quesnel Society were excluded from analyses on digital skills because their programs did not include a digital component.
Source: Learner database.

The learners also reported in the exit survey and focus groups on how they improved their IT/digital skills and confidence. For example, as shown in Figure 7, the majority of learners reported being more confident using computers and other technology (73 per cent) and being better at using computer and technology on their own without the help of others (67 per cent).

Figure 7 Level of agreement that the program improved digital skills and confidence



Notes: Results show combined *agree* and *strongly agree* responses. Palliser Regional Library and Literacy Quesnel Society were excluded from analyses on digital skills because their programs did not include a digital component.
Source: Exit survey.

In the focus groups, learners shared that they had fears associated with technology prior to the program and that, through the program, they experienced notable gains in their digital skills. One learner shared the following about how they were scared to use technology, but that the program helped them with the basics:

> *"I didn't know much of anything related to computer and was almost **scared to use it**…[the program] gave me confidence that I couldn't lose anything. I learned how to do resumes and set them up in Word and talk to people on the computer for interviews. I learned about sending resumes, adding attachments, sending emails, using the keyboard/mouse. Left and right click…I **never used a computer [before this program], so everything was new**. How to use things, how to type. It was a lot of basics."*

Focus group participants also discussed how the IT/digital skills they gained would transfer to the workplace in both current and future jobs. One learner described how much they had learned about using different programs on the computer and the applicability of these learned skills in their new job:

> *"I thought I was skilled, until I realized I wasn't. I had used computer, Excel, but **I had no idea how much I couldn't do** – file management, Adobe, editing in Adobe, Word. This program came about, so I thought I could get skill in this area…What I learned helped me in my new job and I am able to **apply what I learned in my new job**."*

Another learner also shared their fears of using a computer and how improving their digital skills was not something they felt would be particularly valuable for their employability, as they did not think they would have a job where these skills were necessary. However, their perspective changed after completing the program as they realized that digital skills were important and that by improving them, they would increase their job prospects:

> *"I always looked at computers as the **corporate world that I didn't want to be a part of**. I have confidence, but I only have my grade 12. But **now I see the value of computers** and now I'm about to apply for an office administration job. Computers are not so scary after all."*

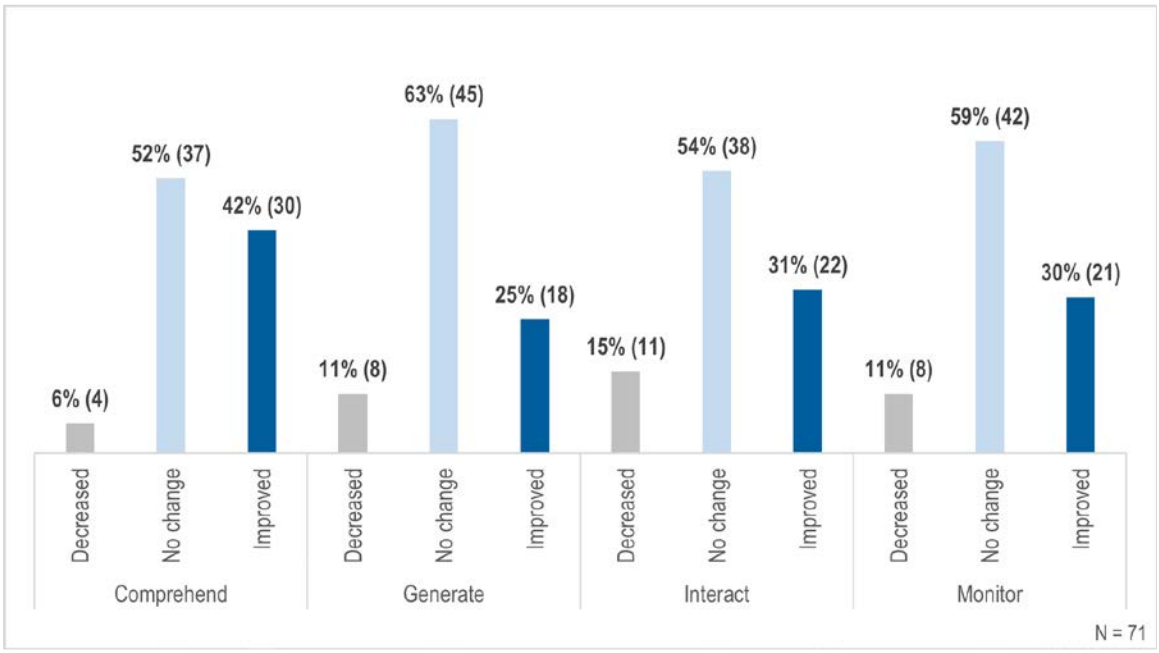
These findings suggest that some learners with low IT/digital skills may have a fear of using computers or technology and/or may not see the value in improving their skills. Thus, this highlights the need for programs that 1) teach basic digital skills based on the general operation of a computer, as well as common programs and functions (e.g., Microsoft Word and Excel, file management, internet navigation, etc.) and 2) help learners understand the value and applicability of building their digital skills.

Communication skills

Similar to IT skills, all of the beta-test projects addressed learners' communication skills both directly (e.g., conducting a presentation) and indirectly (e.g., engaging in group discussions as part of the program). For example, a specific objective of the Autumn Services Fraser Lake beta test (The "YOU" Program) was that learners would develop their skills throughout the program to enable them to lead a presentation on the final day of the program. In contrast, while the Literacy Quesnel Society program did not have a formal focus on developing learners' communication skills, the program included an informal group discussion at the beginning of each class where learners would share about themselves, their reasons for participating, and their goals, thus providing them with the opportunity to develop their communication skills.

Learners' communication skills were assessed on four subdomains – comprehend, generate, interact, and monitor – both prior to and at the end of the program. A comparison between the pre and post training results are shown in Figure 8, demonstrating that 25 per cent to 42 per cent of learners showed skill improvement, 52 per cent to 63 per cent experienced no change, and six per cent to 15 per cent experienced a skills decrease.

Figure 8 Communication: pre-post status change, by subdomain



Note: All four skills levels combined.

Source: Learner database.

In the focus groups, learners shared the ways in which they felt their communication skills had improved because of the program in which they participated. The examples that learners provided were mostly related to communication in the workplace, such as when asking questions (see adjacent quote) or communicating through email. As the quote below illustrates, some learners also indicated how the communication skills training was not new for them, but it provided an important refresher.

*"When you're a pillar in your family, you **may resist to ask a question** because you feel should know it all. But [the facilitator] would draw it out – this **helped me feel comfortable asking for help**. That helps for a workplace context – the ability or assertiveness to be able to ask questions and communicate in employment contexts."*

*"Email communication was helpful; I **tend to be a little informal** and don't realize I'm doing it in an email, so it was **a good refresher** to remind me of the things I should and shouldn't be doing in relation to a job, social media, and texting."*

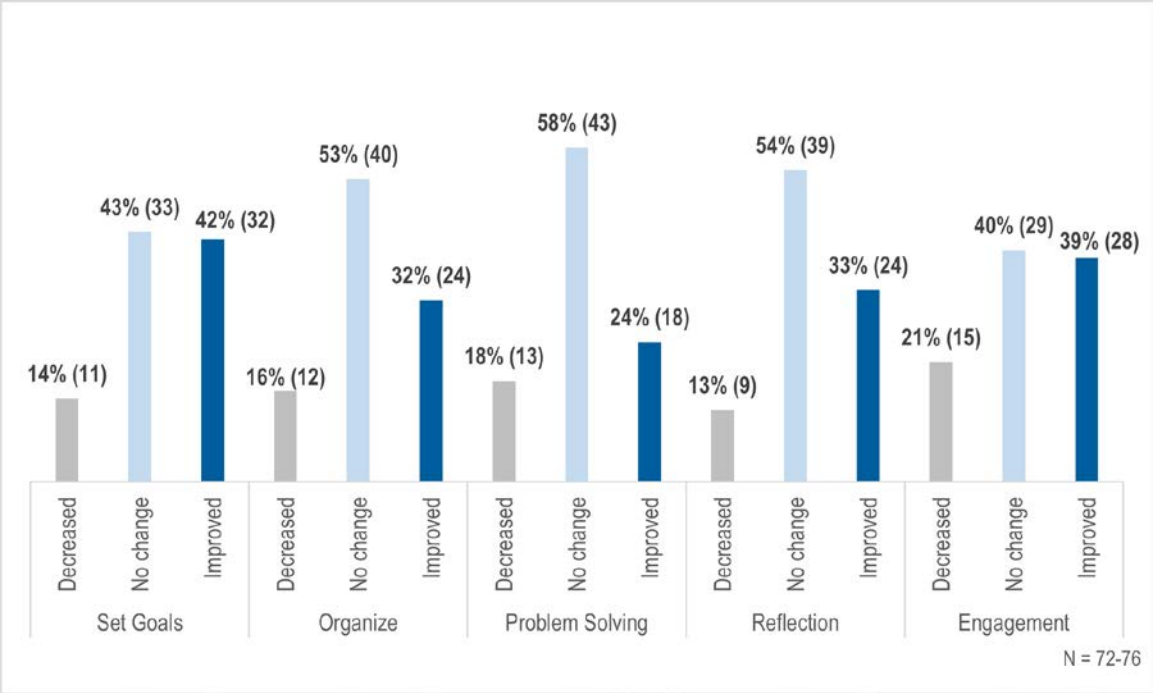
Participation skills

All of the beta-test organizations also aimed to increase learners' participation skills. For example, the Palliser Regional Library's program included specific content related to time

management, which is part of the "organize" subdomain of participation skills. The Lethbridge Public Library's beta-test project specifically focused on Canadian workplace expectations where learners reflected on their own as well as prospective employers' values and beliefs around workplace expectations, which is part of the "reflection" subdomain.

Learners' participation skills were assessed on five subdomains – set goals, organize, problem solving, reflection, and engagement. A comparison between the pre and post training results are shown in Figure 9, demonstrating that 24 per cent to 42 per cent of learners showed skill improvements in this area, 40 per cent to 58 per cent experienced no change, and 13 per cent to 21 per cent showed a skills decrease.

Figure 9 Participation: pre-post status change, by subdomain



Note: All four skills levels combined.

Source: Learner database.

*"I have **more direction now** and know where I am going [with my business]. Before I was up in the clouds just doing it day by day, but **now I have a goal**."*

The focus group findings illustrated the various ways in which learners were supported in developing their participation skills, including their ability to set goals and take steps to achieve them. One learner highlighted in a focus group that the program helped turn their broad business dreams into a realistic and attainable business goal (see adjacent quote). Learners also described the ways in which their participation skills improved in the

"reflection" subdomain. When asked about the ways in which they had changed as a result of the program, one learner described how the program taught them self-acceptance, as well as to consider the perspectives of others before reacting or passing judgement (see quote below).

Practices that contributed to LES development

> *"I learned to accept myself as I am. [The facilitator] said – a lot of people see one point of view but not the whole picture. I learned to **put myself in other's shoes** before reacting or judging them. I learned the **importance of self-acceptance** of my mistakes. I find it hard, but I am learning to accept myself as who I am."*

The focus group findings, along with the findings from interviews with beta-test staff, illustrated several promising practices contributing to the development of learners' LES, particularly related to IT/digital skills (see Box 3).

Box 3: Promising practices for improving IT/digital skills

1. Having learners apply IT/digital skills while focusing on the development of other skills.

- Example from Women Helping Other Women (Adult Languages and Learning): After learning the skills to use Google Sheets, learners were then applying these skills while building their financial literacy to create budgets.
- Example from Connect4Work (Mount Waddington): Learners in the program developed their basic digital skills, such as computer operation and online navigation, and then used these skills to search for jobs and develop job applications online.

2. Going beyond standardized IT/digital skills common in the LES sector to empower learners to be able to make informed decisions about their technology needs.

- Example from Connect4Work (Mount Waddington): Learners developed their basic computer operation skills, but also had the opportunity to develop the skills needed to identify what type of computer best fit their needs based on computer specifications. They would learn about what the specifications mean in terms of performance, storage, etc. of the computer and use this information to identify what computer was the best fit for their needs.

3. Building community capacity for IT/digital skills by providing space that has the appropriate hardware.

- Example from Campbell River Literacy Association (Gold River): After identifying the technology inequities in Gold River, such as lack of wireless internet and very limited resources at the local literacy centre, program staff built a tech lab with computers and high-speed internet to enable community members to have a space to build their digital skills.

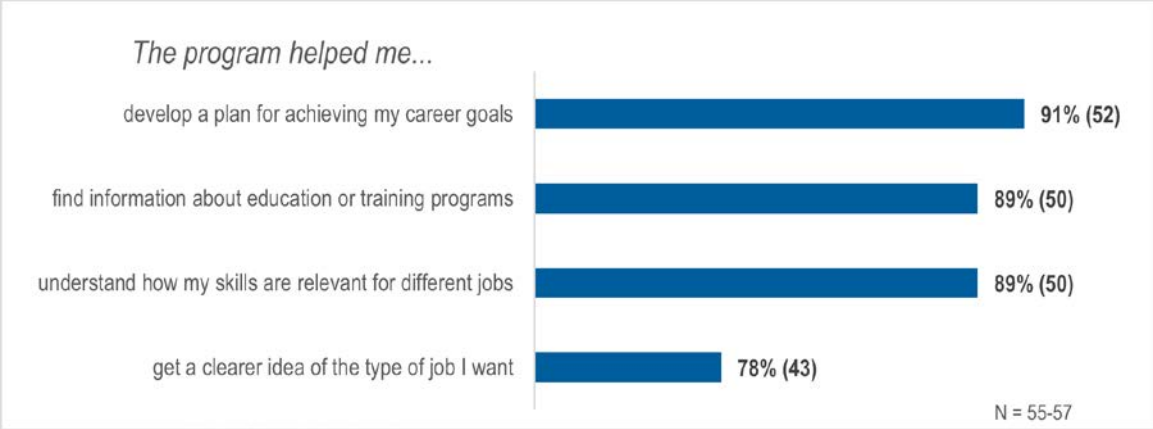
Other skills that contribute to labour market resiliency and success

In addition to LES, the beta-test project also aimed to support learners' skills development related to increasing their capacity for labour market resiliency and success. These include enhancing career planning and job search and preparation skills, as well becoming more aware of, and confident in using, resources and services in their communities that focus on skills development and employment. For these skills, data was collected to not only understand learners' self-reported skills development (i.e., through the focus groups and exit survey), but also to understand if these skills gains translated into improved employment outcomes (i.e., through the 3-month follow up survey).

Career planning and job preparation skills

According to the focus group and exit survey findings, the vast majority of learners felt that the program had improved their career planning/career-related decision-making skills. As shown in Figure 10, the majority of learners reported that they felt the program helped them develop a plan for achieving their career goals (91 per cent), find information about education or training programs (89 per cent), understand how their skills are relevant for different jobs (i.e., transferability of skills) (89 per cent), and get a clearer idea of the type of job they want (78 per cent).

Figure 10 Level of agreement that the program helped improve career planning/decision-making skills



Notes: Results show *agree* and *strongly agree* responses combined. Palliser Regional Library and Literacy Quesnel Society were excluded from analyses because their programs did not include a component on these employment-related skills.
Source: Exit survey.

One focus group participant described how they learned about the value of stress management as a transferable skill that they did not realize would be important to employers (see adjacent quote).

"I didn't think of a lot of these skills as things I could include on a resume. For example, stress management – I can manage my stress in many situations and handle high intensity situations. This program made me realize that ***this is something that many employers would likely want to know*** *and would be of benefit."*

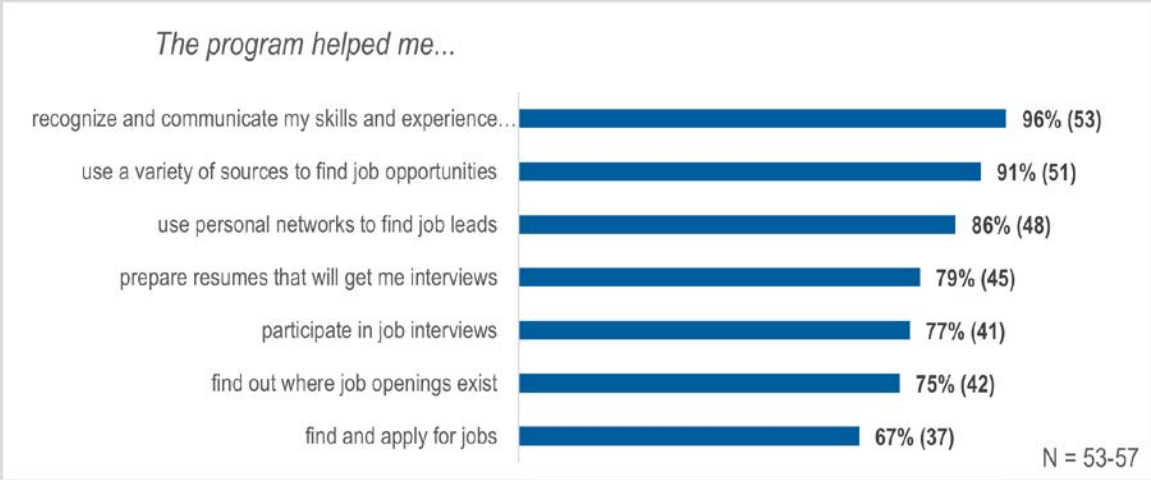
Similarly, the vast majority of learners felt that the program had improved their job search and preparation skills. In the focus groups, many learners identified the career planning and job preparation skills that they felt the beta test helped them to improve, including:

- Finding jobs online (e.g., specific search engines, updating online job search profiles);
- Creating a resume (e.g., templates to use, format, content to include);
- Writing a cover letter (e.g., tailoring to job and employer, content to include, format);
- Developing interview skills (e.g., employer expectations with interviews, interview preparation, professionalism);
- Identifying transferable skills (e.g., applying skills in different types of jobs, communicating transferable skills to employers); and
- Developing entrepreneurial skills (e.g., seeking supports for entrepreneurs, developing entrepreneurial goals, identifying opportunities for entrepreneurship).

Some learners shared that the mock interviews were particularly helpful because now they learned what to expect in an interview setting. Others shared how they were able to update their job search profiles so that they would standout to employers and to make sure they were notified of jobs that fit their interests and skills.

Learners also confirmed an improvement in their job search and preparation skills in the exit survey. As shown in Figure 11, the majority of learners reported that they felt the program helped them recognize and communicate their skills and experience (96 per cent), use a variety of sources to find job opportunities (91 per cent), use personal networks to find job leads (86 per cent), prepare resumes that would get them an interview (79 per cent), participate in job interviews (77 per cent), find out where job openings exist (75 per cent), and find and apply for jobs (67 per cent).

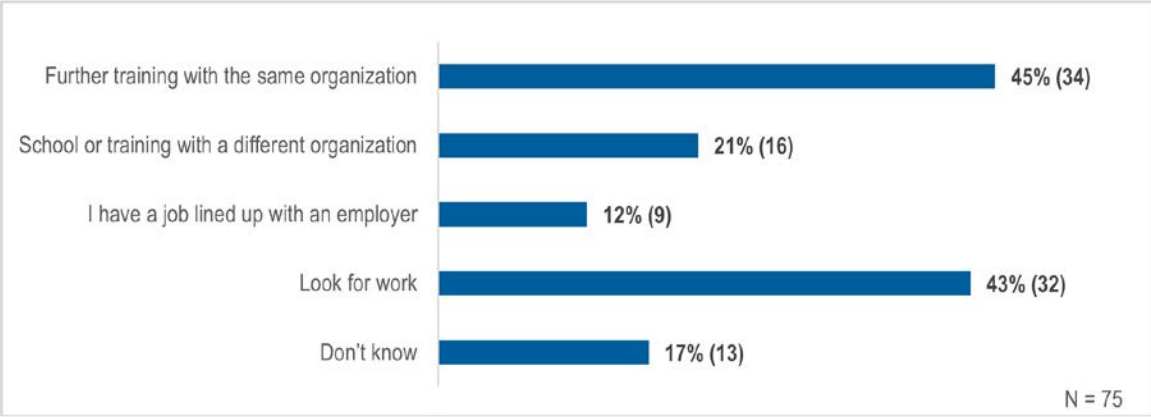
Figure 11 Level of agreement that the program helped improve job search and preparation skills



Notes: Results show *agree* and *strongly agree* responses combined. Palliser Regional Library and Literacy Quesnel Society were excluded from analyses because their programs did not include a component on these employment-related skills.
Source: Exit survey.

Learners were asked at program completion about the training or employment activities they planned to engage in to understand if and how their improved career planning and job search skills would be utilized. The three-month follow-up survey, despite its much smaller response rate, provides an indication of the activities in which program learners had engaged after completing the program. As shown in Figure 12, upon program completion almost half of learners indicated they were planning to do further training with the same organization (45 per cent) and/or look for work (43 per cent), around 20 per cent indicated that they were planning to do further schooling or training with a different organization, and some had a job already lined up with an employer (12 per cent). Some learners also reported that they did not know what training or employment activities they planned to do (17 per cent). There was also a diverse range of *other* responses. Frequencies for the various responses were typically low ($n<5$) with some including self-employment, hoping to take further computer courses, etc.

Figure 12 Future activities planned at program exit



Notes: Figure does not include learners from Palliser Regional Library, Adult Languages and Learning (Cohort 2), and Capilano University as data had not been submitted for these beta-test sites at the time of the analysis. Total per cent exceeds 100% because learners could choose more than one response option.
Source: Exit survey.

The three-month follow-up survey showed the extent to which learners engaged in skills development and employment-related activities after their program completion. In the follow-up survey, nearly all respondents indicated that the beta test encouraged them to look for work (96 per cent) and to take steps to improve their work-related skills (96 per cent). Furthermore, as shown in Figure 13, two-thirds of respondents reported that they had searched for job opportunities (66 per cent), half applied for jobs in their community (50 per cent), and/or searched for some type of training program to apply for (50 per cent). Almost one third of learners who completed the follow-up survey had participated in job interviews (31 per cent); and some respondents had started or completed some type of training program (19 per cent), applied for jobs outside their community (16 per cent), and/or started volunteering (16 per cent).

Figure 13 Learner activities 3-months post program completion

Notes: Figure does not include learners from Palliser Regional Library, Adult Languages and Learning (Cohort 2), and Capilano University, as data had not been submitted for these beta-test sites at the time of the analysis. Total per cent exceeds 100% because learners could choose more than one response option.
Source: Follow-up survey.

These findings illustrate the diversity of career planning and job searching skills learners developed across the beta-test projects and that learners were inspired to put them into action after finishing their training.

Awareness of, and confidence in using, community resources, networks, and services

According to the exit survey and focus group findings, the vast majority of learners shared that the program in which they participated had improved awareness of and confidence in using community services/resources and personal networks/contacts. As shown in Figure 14, the majority of learners reported in the exit survey that the program improved their knowledge of services and resources in their community (91 per cent), their confidence in finding information on services and resources in their community (91 per cent), and their confidence in reaching out to employers and personal networks to learn about job opportunities (85 per cent).

Figure 14 Level of agreement that the program helped improve awareness of, and confidence in using, services, resources, and networks

Notes: Results show *agree* and *strongly agree* responses combined. Total per cent exceeds 100% because learners could choose more than one response option.

Source: Exit survey.

In the focus groups, learners identified some of the community services and resources they became aware of through the programs, including the local public library, employment services, educational institutions, health services, and other services provided by the beta-test organizations (e.g., courses, one-on-one supports, resources, etc.). As one learner highlighted in a focus group, there are often many services and resources available in communities to help with employment, but sometimes individuals are just not aware of them and so they do not access them (see quote below).

> *"I've been in [the community] for 2 years and because I'm at home I didn't know about some of the resources and community job fairs.* ***It wasn't on my radar****. In doing this program, I realize that there are a lot of organizations, programs, resources that can help once looking for work is my focus, so* ***I can use those when the time comes****."*

Another learner described how the program helped them identify who to reach out to in their networks to provide testimonials for their portfolio and website and to feel more confident in doing so:

> *"One of the things you want to have for a creative portfolio are testimonials from people.* ***That was part of the portfolio process*** *and homework "make a list of people you could contact for this." I started to do this, and* ***I will now have a few testimonials*** *for my website in the next few weeks. I will have more than one, which will be helpful."*

To understand if and how learners would act on their increased awareness and confidence, they were asked at program completion about their plans to connect with community services,

networks, and resources to seek out employment opportunities, with the three-month follow-up survey providing a snapshot of what actions learners took after completing their programs. As shown in Figure 15, the majority of learners indicated upon program completion that they intended to use a greater number of services and resources in their community (88 per cent) and/or to reach out to employers and personal contact to learn about job opportunities (81 per cent).

Figure 15 Level of agreement in intentions to connect with contacts and community resources at program exit

Notes: Results show *agree* and *strongly agree* responses combined. Total per cent exceeds 100% because learners could choose more than one response option.

Source: Exit survey.

Again, while there were fewer respondents to the follow up survey, it does provide an indication of how some learners did in fact connect with community services, networks, and resources. As shown in Figure 16, about one third of the survey respondents reported that they had connected with community services or resources to help find work or further training (31 per cent) and a similar percentage had contacted their personal network to find about job opportunities (31 per cent). A smaller percentage (22 per cent) reported that they had contacted employers directly to find out about job opportunities.

Figure 16 Learner actions regarding connecting with contacts and community services at 3-month follow-up

Note: Figure does not include learners from Palliser Regional Library, Adult Languages and Learning (Cohort 2), and Capilano University, as data had not been submitted for these beta-test sites at the time of the analysis.

Source: Follow-up survey.

While the small sample of the follow-up survey must be treated with caution, these results are promising as they suggest that providing opportunities for learners to increase their awareness of community services and resources not only improves their confidence in connecting with them, but may also contribute to behavioural changes among some learners to take steps to access services and other resources to improve their employment outcomes.

Practices used to improve career planning and job preparation skills

The focus group findings, along with the findings from interviews with beta-test staff, illustrate promising practices that can help learners build their career planning and job preparation skills, as well as their awareness of, and confidence in using, community resources, networks, and services (see Box 4).

Box 4: Promising practices to build career planning and job preparation skills

1. Providing opportunities in class to practice job preparation skills and network with employers from the community.

- Example from Moving Forward: New Opportunities, New Lives (Lethbridge Public Library): Learners did mock interviews with volunteers with Human Resources experience. Employers from the community also presented in class about employment opportunities and the application process.

2. Building entrepreneurial skills based on learners' interests and skills that could be turned into a business opportunity.

- Example from Gathering Together: Introduction to Small Business Startup within Indigenous Communities (Capilano University): Based on learners' self-identified hobbies that they were already marketing in their communities, learners had the opportunity to develop the skills to turn their hobby into a small business by building their entrepreneurial skills.

3. Integrating specific training and certifications into the program to help increase the employability of learners.

- Example from Driver Education Preparation Program (Literacy Quesnel Society): The program was developed to guide learners through preparing to take their driver's license exam, which would enable them to be employed in jobs that require a driver's license.
- Example from Technology and Personal Skills Training (Fort Nelson Community Literacy Society): The program was developed to provide learners with the skills and no cost opportunities to obtain specific certifications and tickets (e.g., WHMIS, First Aid, H2S) to enable learners to be employed in jobs that required them.

4. Developing learners' skills to not only help them find a job, but also retain a job.

- Example from **Technology and Personal Skills Training** (Fort Nelson Community Literacy Society): Part of the program focused on mental health in the context of employment, such as stress management and mindfulness strategies for learners to use in the workplace to help manage their stress and regulate their emotions.

5. Helping learners identify and communicate their transferable skills to potential employers.

- Example from **Next Steps Training** (Community Learning Alternatives): The program focused on helping learners to identify the skills they had acquired outside of the workplace and understand how they could be applied in a work setting. Learners also learned how to communicate these skills in cover letters, resumes, and interviews.

LEARNERS' WELL-BEING OUTCOMES

Beyond the development of specific skills, the survey and focus group findings demonstrated how participation in the beta-test projects also led to outcomes related to learners' well-being, particularly their sense of belonging, as well as their self-confidence and other aspects of well-being. In the focus groups, these findings were what learners most frequently cited when identifying the most meaningful impacts of the program that they experienced.

Sense of belonging

The focus groups revealed that for many learners, their shared experience with other learners and their relationships with program facilitators were central to an impactful training experience that contributed to their sense of belonging. Focus group participants expressed their appreciation in taking part in a program with individuals who were also facing similar experiences of displacement from work and barriers to employment. One learner described how it can be difficult to talk about these experiences with other people and how talking about them in the program with others fostered a sense of community with the other learners:

> *"The program brought together a group of individuals, with **similar backgrounds and profiles**…The things we were talking about in terms of jobs, skills – they can be sensitive…This **brought the sense of community together**."*

Learners described how this sense of community made them feel less alone in their experiences and challenges with finding and maintaining employment, as is shown in the following quote from a learner in one of the virtual programs:

> *"Watching the other learners manage their daily lives, there was such a foundation built in this group. I knew **I wasn't alone** in the program. There was a sense of community."*

Some learners indicated that participating in their program was one of their few opportunities for social connection due to the COVID-19 pandemic and, thus, was even more important for their sense of belonging as they were concerned about becoming socially isolated. Interestingly, this feeling of community was shared by learners who participated in both in-person programs and virtual programs, suggesting that this sense of belonging can be developed in both program environments. For example, the Lethbridge Public Library and Adult Language and Learning programs were both delivered virtually, whereas the Campbell River Literacy Association and Autumn Services Fraser Lake programs were both delivered in-person. In the focus groups with learners from these four programs, the majority of learners described how they felt connected to the other learners and that they built a community within their respective programs.

The focus group discussions also revealed that the connection between learners and program facilitators helped learners feel like they belonged in the program and also in the workforce. Learners described how the facilitators were accepting of each their unique interests, backgrounds, and needs, and made them feel welcomed and a part of the community of learners within the beta test. For example, a learner who identified as a racialized woman described how she often felt excluded from other programs because she did not feel represented in the content. In the focus group, she shared how:

> *"I've always had the two strikes against me: minority and a woman. Everything in the **program content was multicultural**. It was never just one-sided. It was implemented so it could be directed to every type of lifestyle. **Most teachings are one-directed** and this course included multiple sides."*

The strong relationships that developed between learners and facilitators meant that the facilitators were more aware of how each learner could be supported both within and outside of their programs. For example, the majority of learners in the Literacy Quesnel Society program shared with the facilitator that they were anxious about writing the driver's license exam. The objective of the program was to help learners prepare for the exam, which they would then schedule and write outside of the program on their own time. In response to this fear among most of their learners, the program facilitator developed a section of the program that addressed test anxiety and how to manage it when completing the exam.

Focus group participants also described how the facilitators reinforced that they belonged in the workforce by helping them understand the strengths and skills they would bring as an employee as well as their value as individuals. This is illustrated in the following quote:

> *"[The facilitator] kept saying there's always a job out there for each and every one of us. There's **always a fit there somewhere**. She said there's always really great employers out there who would be **grateful to have people like us.** She always reinforced us and gave us confidence."*

These findings highlight that for learners, the beta-test projects were more than just an opportunity to build their skills, they provided them with a safe space to connect, share, and be supported by both fellow learners and facilitators who understood the challenges they were going through.

Self-confidence and other aspects of well-being

According to the exit survey, the vast majority of learners felt that the program helped improve their well-being. As shown in Figure 17, most learners reported improved confidence (97 per cent), hope for the future (92 per cent), self-esteem (90 per cent), sense of being connected to their local community (84 per cent), and satisfaction with their life in general (84 per cent).

Figure 17 Level of agreement that the program contributed to well-being at program exit

Note: Results show *agree* and *strongly agree* responses combined.
Source: Exit survey.

While the exit survey findings show that learners felt their well-being was improved in multiple areas, the focus group findings suggest that improved self-confidence was the most meaningful outcome for learners. In the focus groups, when asked to "identify one word that describes how they are feeling after completing the program" or "describe how they think they have changed as a result of the program", the most common response was related to self-confidence.

As one learner shared, their confidence improved by developing an understanding of what type of learner they were:

> *"I grew up always thinking that I had a learning disability and **couldn't learn anything**. [The facilitator] sent us something at the beginning of the class about what type of learners we are. [After completing that], now I know that **I'm not dumb and that I can be taught**."*

Learners shared that their confidence improved in applying their existing and/or new skills, whether it was resume-writing, interviewing, communicating over email, navigating Google applications, managing files on a computer, or reaching out to services in their community. As one learned explained, the new skills they developed made them feel confident about becoming employed:

> *"I feel **empowered**. I feel like now I have **more confidence** when it comes to going out into the workforce. I have definitely upgraded some life skills."*

Others described how, as a result of their programs, they became confident in their ability to find meaningful work or meet their goals, whether they were to pass a driver's license exam, use their new skills to find work in their field, or open a business that aligned with their passion. Another learner shared that they felt left behind in their workplace because they did not have the digital skills they needed to adapt as the business evolved. The learner shared in their focus group how they felt after completing their program that had a digital skills focus:

> *"I was [in the trades] for years, but **everything today is on a computer**, such as work orders, invoicing, etc. and now I feel **more confident** to be able to do that and not be afraid of the computer."*

These findings suggest that beyond improving learners LES and career planning and job searching skills, participating in the beta-test projects was an opportunity for many learners to feel connected to others who faced similar struggles and to feel like they were part of a community working towards similar goals. The relationships they developed with the other learners and the facilitator helped them feel that they not only belonged in the program, but also in the workforce. The evaluation findings also suggest that the beta-test projects contributed to learners feeling more confident that their new skills would enable them to secure meaningful employment.

Practices to build a sense of belonging and self-confidence

The focus group findings, along with the findings from interviews with beta-test staff, identified the following promising practices for helping learners feel a sense of belonging and build their self-confidence (see Box 5).

Box 5: Practices to create a sense of belonging and build self-confidence

1. Developing programs for equity-deserving groups that have been underrepresented in previous LES programming.

- Example from Moving Forward: New Opportunities, New Lives (Lethbridge Public Library): The program was designed for newcomers who may be unfamiliar with Canadian workplace expectations, both explicit and implicit, and who could connect with each other over their experiences of being new to Canada.
- Example from Women Helping Other Women (Adult Languages and Learning): The program was designed for women, as the program staff identified that women were particularly impacted by unemployment due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

2. Building strong relationships with learners by having informal and formal opportunities to learn about their experiences and interests.

- Example from The You Program (Autumn Services Fraser Lake): Learners were asked to complete a daily journal to submit to the program facilitator each day. This provided learners with an opportunity to share their experiences, learnings, challenges, etc. with only the facilitator in a private way, without having to do so with the entire group, so that the facilitator could adapt the program to meet the needs of each learner.
- Example from Gathering Together: Introduction to Small Business Startup within Indigenous Communities (Capilano University): At the beginning of each class, the learners and facilitator shared a meal together that was provided by the program. This created an opportunity for the facilitator to have conversations with the learners to get to know them, build relationships, and hear about their ideas and interests in an informal manner.

KEY FINDINGS RELATED TO BETA-TEST ORGANIZATIONS

The following section outlines the key findings from the project related to the 11 literacy organizations that were part of the project's beta-test phase. While this section summarizes the key themes across the beta-test organizations, it is important to acknowledge the diversity of the organizations when reviewing this section. The beta-test sites differed in the ways in which they designed, developed, and delivered their beta-test projects, including:

- Beta-test organizations took different approaches to program development. Some beta-test projects involved a completely new program that was designed from scratch, whereas others involved an adaptation of a pre-existing internal or external program.
- The focus of the beta-test projects varied. Some were related to entrepreneurship, transferable skills, driver's license test preparation, Canadian workplace expectations, etc.
- The beta-test projects also targeted different populations of displaced workers, such as women, Indigenous peoples, and newcomers.
- The schedule and length of the training programs varied. Some beta-test projects offered half-day classes that ran every day over a four-week period, whereas others ran twice per week over six weeks with full-day classes.
- The beta-test projects varied in the number of cohorts of learners they delivered. Some programs only had one cohort, others involved four cohorts, while one enrolled learners on an as-needed basis.
- In terms of the learning environment, five of the beta-test projects were delivered virtually due to the pandemic, five were able to deliver their programs fully in-person and one offered a mix of in-person and virtual training.
- The programs used a variety of different program content, some of which was developed from scratch and some that was based on existing content (e.g., Soft Skills Solutions©, ABC Literacy's UP Skills for Work) with a variety of learning activities, such as mock interviews, journals, portfolios, guest speakers, practice quizzes, presentations, group discussions, etc.
- The beta-test organizations partnered with a diversity of community partners in a variety of roles. Partners included local libraries, colleges or other training organizations, employment service agencies, and small business services. Some beta-test sites only involved partners in

recruitment activities, some involved partners in supporting program delivery (i.e., guest speakers, workshop facilitation), and some involved partners in both recruitment and program delivery.

There was a great deal of diversity in how the beta-test projects unfolded across the communities; however, several common themes emerged related to the outcomes for beta-test organizations, as well as the challenges they experienced.

This section of the report includes three parts. The first two identify outcomes for the beta-test organizations, including their increased capacity and opportunities for innovation. The final section discusses the challenges experienced by the beta-test organizations in developing and delivering their programs.

INCREASED CAPACITY

A secondary goal of this project was to enhance the capacity of LES organizations to support their communities. This section highlights some of the areas of the project that helped to increase this capacity. Increased capacity is particularly important given that most of beta-test sites were located in rural communities, which as mentioned in the Project Rationale section, are increasingly affected by unemployment from economic slowdowns or industry shutdowns, declining populations, as well as amalgamation and regionalization of services that have resulted in a loss of access to resources and services.

The findings showed that the project contributed to organizational and community capacity development in the following areas:

- Greater access to, and availability of, LES services in the community;
- New or strengthened partnerships between LES organizations and community supports and services, particularly skills training and employment-related supports;
- New or continued relationships between LES organizations and learners;
- Increased provincial and national networks for LES organizations; and
- Increased capacity for research and evaluation.

Each of these areas are described in more detail below.

Access to and availability of LES services

In the follow-up interviews, beta-test leads shared how their projects filled a need in their communities by increasing access to LES, employment, and other related services through the provision of training, as well as hardware (e.g., computers, laptops, tablets,) to facilitate access to training. This was particularly the case for equity-deserving groups.

By participating in this project, some organizations were able to develop and implement a new idea with the funding that has led to additional funding for further adaptation or expansion of their project, resulting in opportunities for sustained training programs in their communities. For example, Literacy Quesnel Society received funding through a curriculum development grant to turn their beta-test materials into a self-directed curriculum. The curriculum was designed to be accessible for individuals without regular internet access by making it accessible through the Decoda website and where it could be downloaded and saved for later use. This expanded access to the program allowed learners to engage in either the facilitated or self-directed versions, depending on their needs and availability.

Some of the beta-test organizations capitalized on the funding opportunity to increase accessibility of LES and employment services in their communities for specific equity-deserving groups. For example, the Adult Languages and Learning beta-test project (Chatham, ON) was specifically developed for women; the Columbia Basin Alliance for Literacy (Columbia Basin-Boundary, BC) and the Lethbridge Public Library (Lethbridge, AB) programs were specifically developed for newcomers in those regions; and the Capilano University program (Mount Currie, BC) was specifically developed for Indigenous peoples through its extensive work with Líl̓wat First Nation at the Nation's Tsz̓il Learning Centre. These beta-test initiatives were all developed to increase the availability of LES and employment training for groups whose needs were not met through current local programming.

The Campbell River Literacy Association focused its best test program on increasing access to LES services through the provision of hardware in a community with limited resources. the organization began with starting a technology hub in Gold River, which is a very remote community that had limited internet and technology access with no wireless internet in the community and no cell service until early 2020. This made it challenging for residents to take advantage of a variety of virtual services and training, including those focused on LES and employment. Many residents also lacked the digital skills required to take full advantage of virtual services and programs. Further, local in-person opportunities for training were very limited, due to the small and remote nature of the community. With such limited community services and training, residents were forced to travel long distances to access it at regional centres.

These technology and infrastructure inequities in Gold River were increased during the COVID-19 pandemic when many programs and services shifted to online. By partnering with the Gold River Literacy Society to create a technology lab in Gold River which provided computers and internet access, the Campbell River Literacy Association's beta-test project increased the physical access to programming in the community, as well as the opportunity for learners to take part in virtual programming and build their digital skills.

These examples illustrate how the need for increased access to, and availability of, LES and employment services in rural and remote communities looks different in each community. This need can stem from factors related to the reality of the local economy, lack of existing hardware and/or resources, inadequate previous LES programs, among others. For a number of the lead organizations, their beta-test projects provided an opportunity to address the lack of access to, and availability of, LES programming for community members in a variety of ways, whether through filling a program and service gap, providing computer hardware, or enhancing access to online programming to displaced workers with diverse backgrounds.

New and strengthened partnerships in communities

Beta-test organizations shared how their participation in the DWLES project strengthened their existing partnerships with community-based organizations, particular organizations focused on employment type services, as well as developed new partnerships. For example, Community Learning Alternatives (CLA) in Hastings County, Ontario increased their referral capacity through their strengthened partnership with the Ontario Works program, which provides integrated employment services and financial assistance for individuals who are experiencing temporary financial need. The focus of the CLA beta-test project on transferable and job preparation skills aligned well with the needs of many Ontario Works clients. As a result, Ontario Works became a strong referral partner for the project and CLA continues to receive Ontario Works client referrals for other programs offered by their organization.

Another example is the partnership between Palliser Regional Library and Prairie Skies Integration Network that strengthened as a result of work related to the beta test. During the beta-test development stage, the leads reached out to Prairie Skies to learn about the literacy needs of newcomers in the region. This was an opportunity to learn about each organization, share resources, and plan how to leverage their collective knowledge and skills to increase supports for the LES needs of newcomers. While the beta test ended up shifting focus due to unexpected socioeconomic changes in the community, this connection resulted in a staff member from Palliser Regional Library becoming a board member of Prairie Skies. Furthermore, this partnership increased the capacity of Prairie Skies to reach out to newcomers in other regions of Saskatchewan due to their ability to now draw on Palliser's extensive connections throughout the province.

Other beta-test organizations reported that they had developed entirely new partnerships with community organizations or groups as a result of their beta-test project. For example, Campbell River Literacy Association developed a new relationship with Tsa 'Xana First Nation as a result of a member of the First Nation attending their beta test being delivered in the nearby community of Gold River. This new relationship has sparked potential opportunities for partnership and collaboration to build the LES capacity of the Nation.

Other new partnerships resulting from the beta-test projects included a new connection between the Lethbridge Public Library and Economic Development Lethbridge, as well as one between Capilano University and the Pemberton and District Chamber of Commerce. Both of these partnerships were established with the intent to support learners who were interested in entrepreneurship.

These examples show that the DWLES project strengthened and expanded community partnerships in the beta-test communities. Developing and/or strengthening relevant, inclusive, and local programming created an opportunity for beta-test organizations and their partners to increase their referral capacity to reach additional learners, connect with other services to support program design or delivery, and connect with organizations or communities for future opportunities.

New and continued relationships with learners

In addition to partnership development with community-based organizations and groups, the beta-test organizations shared that the project increased their capacity to connect with new learners who had not previously accessed their services or attended their programming, and who they will continue to support beyond the beta-test project.

For example, Literacy Quesnel Society focused very specifically on integrating LES training with driver's education. The new focus on driver's education ended up bringing new clientele to the organization that had not typically used their services. In this way, their beta-test project helped the organization to engage and support a different population of learners who may not have otherwise enrolled in a general literacy program.

As noted above, CLA in Hastings County, Ontario was able to reach to a new group of learners through referrals from Ontario Works. These learners may not have previously enrolled in their programs due to lack of awareness or interest. Furthermore, once these new learners took part in the beta-test project, they were able to identify other areas of skills development and enroll in further CLA programming. This has allowed the organization to continue supporting learners beyond the beta-test project.

Provincial and national networks

Many beta-test leads also discussed how the project built their provincial and national networks. This occurred both through regular meetings throughout the project and through the pre-conference workshops at the Decoda Literacy Conference, held every two years. These networking opportunities enabled the beta-test leads to meet with literacy practitioners in other parts of their province or country, share lessons learned, discuss challenges and highlights, learn about new resources, and compare literacy issues in other contexts. While many of the leads in BC knew of each other through their previous work with Decoda, the beta-testing phase provided an opportunity for the leads to develop a stronger working relationship and also to meet literacy practitioners in as Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario, as well as the members of the project's Canadian National Advisory Committee (CNAC).

When asked about their connection with the other beta-test leads, the majority of leads spoke to the value of shared experience among everyone in the meetings, as well as the opportunity for resource and knowledge sharing. As one beta-test lead commented:

> *"I felt really guilty at the beginning of the program because we only had a few learners. [I] started feeling a little better when I realized we weren't alone in recruiting low numbers. The COVID context really impacted our numbers."*

Most of the other leads shared similar sentiments about how they felt relief and solidarity when discussing challenges they experienced with their colleagues across the country.

Furthermore, some beta-test leads discussed how the project meetings organized by Decoda were an opportunity to learn about promising practices for recruitment, such as providing meals to learners or innovative marketing strategies, as well as new resources that were available in the literacy community. During leads meetings in the latter stages of the project, the beta-test leads also explored different ideas for sustaining their projects. For example, one lead shared how they were not sure how to navigate a fee-for-service model as a non-profit as a way to deliver an adapted version of the training to interested businesses. Another beta-test lead offered to share their fee-for-service information and the ways in which the model worked for their organization. Additionally, the meetings were a catalyst to establishing connections among leads outside of the project meetings. Some leads reached out to others about sharing their intake forms or the online resources that they were using (e.g., ABC Life Literacy Canada's UP Skills for Work workbooks). The opportunity to connect with other literacy practitioners increased the capacity of the lead organizations to problem solve, learn about new opportunities, and also feel less alone in the struggles they experienced as small non-profit organizations operating during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some beta-test leads also discussed how the project contributed to increased capacity to advocate about the impacts and needs of the sector by bringing together practitioners from across the country to work together on this project. The project's network of a national group of literacy practitioners also provided an opportunity to examine how many of the literacy concerns identified in specific rural and remote communities are transferable to other communities, including the link between poverty and low literacy, the impact of limited internet access on learners' literacy and employment, and the strong influence of large resource-based employers (e.g., mining, oil and gas, powerplants, mill, etc.) on economic wellbeing in rural and remote communities. While each beta-test organization operating individually was limited in what they could do to advance literacy objectives provincially or nationally, the project was able to connect practitioners across the country to provide a national perspective on the LES training needs of smaller communities, particularly those in rural and remote contexts.

Research and evaluation

Lastly, beta-test leads shared how the project also contributed to the increased research and evaluation capacity of their organizations and the sector more broadly. During one of the project meetings, a partner shared how:

> *"Going through this [research and evaluation] process allowed organizations to take the time to measure the things they knew would happen, but never had the capacity to do on their own."*

The organizations shared how they derived a lot of value from being part of a larger project that had common objectives and outcomes, but where they still had the autonomy to develop, design, and deliver a program that fit with the needs of their communities and learners. The project was an opportunity to validate their organizational experiences with evidence from the evaluation and use the project outputs and learnings to further their work (i.e., new or continued projects) and advance the sector.

At the individual organizational level, most leads noted how their capacity for program planning and evaluation increased through their involvement in the project. Each beta test was asked to develop a theory of change for their project to illustrate how it would contribute to the expected outcomes for their learners and their communities. While the leads had different levels of experience developing theories of changes and some identified the challenging nature of this activity, most indicated it was a valuable process to go through. One beta-test lead shared that it provided valuable learning related to evaluation because it allowed her organization to:

> *"Be able to measure things that you know will happen but never have the time, resources, or expertise to do it properly."*

Some of the beta-test organizations noted that the theory of change development process also enhanced their program planning capacity. As one lead commented:

> *"[The theory of change] took us beyond what we usually do in our literacy work. It's always outcome-based planning, so the theory of change had more steps. It helped to think through steps rather than just outcomes."*

For a sector that has limited funds, resources, time, and capacity, the interviews revealed how the beta leads viewed this project as a way for their organizations to collectively demonstrate the potential impact, and reaffirm the value, of the LES sector. They also shared how it contributed to increased program planning and evaluation skills within their individual organizations, which they believed would increase their capacity to do further work of a similar nature in the future.

OPPORTUNITY FOR INNOVATION

The experimental nature of the beta-testing projects created an opportunity for the beta-test organizations to be creative and try new ideas. This led to the beta-test organizations being able to experiment with different or new programming and learn from these experiences within a low-risk context.

Innovation within the best test projects took a variety of forms, such as building on an existing program based on an emerging need, creating a new program that had been "on the backburner" due to a lack of funding or time, offering an entirely new type of program that the organization had not previously delivered, or further exploring how to address a specific challenge in the community. For example, the CLA beta test came from an idea that had been simmering among staff for a long time; however, they had never had the funding to design and deliver it. The beta-test funding allowed them to develop their project on a small scale and then continue to refine it over multiple cohorts. For organizations with very limited funds and resources that present a challenge for broadening their programs scope, the beta-test funding provided an opportunity to expand their programming into other areas to determine if it was viable as a long-term program for their organization.

For Mount Waddington Family Literacy Society, their beta-test project involved developing an entirely new program related to digital skills training. After each of the three cohorts of learners, the facilitator updated the curriculum based on learner feedback and what worked and what did not work in the training delivery. The curriculum is now at the point where it has been developed into a guidebook for other facilitators to use.

For Palliser Regional Library, their programs are typically delivered directly through their branches in communities. The beta-test funding provided an opportunity for the regional library

to deliver programming itself, rather than through one of their branches. While the initial training idea did not come to fruition due to economic changes in the community, the fact that the beta-testing funding was focused on learning and trying new ideas, the organization was still able to remain part of the project and had the opportunity to change course and develop another training initiative for the project.

One beta-test lead illustrated the impact of the opportunity to innovate and learn when they noted:

> *"As the pressure started to build [as the project moved forward], I kept telling myself that it was beta and we were trying to figure out what would work in the community. We did figure that out, some things that worked and some that didn't."*

For the beta-test leads, the DWLES project offered an opportunity for the organizations to innovate and be creative with their programming to see what would work to best support displaced workers in their communities.

Beta-test leads shared how the funding they typically receive is limited and/or involves strict criteria about how the funds can be used, which limits their ability to expand their programming if it required additional resources. In contrast, the funding parameters for the beta-test projects were flexible and supportive of experimentation. As one beta-test lead indicated:

> *"We get funding from the funder that require following strict rules. Decoda has allowed more flexibility through the beta test. It would be good to have these opportunities to be more innovative. This has been a great opportunity to allow that flexibility, to try things out…We're going to keep building on this. Beta testing is about working thing through, learning."*

Many shared that the unique funding experience reduced the pressure they felt to reach high numbers of program participants and allowed them to focus on developing a program that fit the unique needs of learners in their community and adapting the program as it continued.

CHALLENGES FOR BETA-TEST ORGANIZATIONS

Through beta testing of their LES initiatives, the lead organizations had the opportunity to increase their capacity and innovate with their programming; however, the beta-testing process also posed some challenges that were common across the organizations, particularly related to the requirements for innovation and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Requirements for innovation

While the opportunity to innovate was a positive aspect of the project, the focus on innovation presented a challenge for some of the lead organizations given its smaller scale. Some beta-test leads described how it was challenging to develop and implement a completely new project from scratch with funding that was targeting a small number of learners. They noted how it takes a similar amount of time and resources to develop a program for a small number as it does for a larger group. For some of these small organizations, it was a lot of work to develop a completely new program due to the time it takes for ideation, curriculum development and recruitment. One beta-test lead shared that they only had the necessary time they ended up needing to commit to the project because they were less busy at their organization due to the COVID-19 pandemic. These findings highlight the importance for funders to consider the additional capacity and funding needed by small, non-profit organizations that will allow them to develop new programming.

Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic

As previously discussed, the COVID-19 pandemic introduced significant recruitment challenges for organizations to engage learners in their beta-test projects; however, the pandemic also created challenges for the leads related to organizational operations, partnerships with other organizations, and their ability to connect learners to the job market. Through lockdowns, virus outbreaks, and the emergence of new variants, the lead organizations experienced a lot of unpredictability in how they were able to operate. There were concerns from staff about their risk of exposure to the virus or exposing community members to the virus, as well issues arising from navigating continuously changing government-imposed mandates related to health and safety protocols. This caused some beta-test projects, particularly those that were delivered in-person, to have to be postponed numerous times. As one beta-test lead described when discussing the challenges related to the pandemic, "it was hard to advertise [the beta test] because we had no scheduled dates. It kept changing because of COVID. We didn't do a formal invitation with a name on a list until we knew when [the beta test] was." The scheduling unpredictability not only led to recruitment challenges, but it also made it difficult for staff to know when they would be needed for the program and when space would be needed to offer the program.

Additionally, some programs were initially planned to be in-person, but then switched to being offered virtually due to staff safety concerns. One beta-test lead shared the following on the challenges faced by their organization: "We couldn't physically offer the program in person because of COVID, [the community] has had numerous outbreaks. It has been very bad there, so I was not comfortable going there in person and so we had to move virtually. However, the broadband connectivity makes [virtual] programming a barrier." The sudden need for some

programs to move to a virtual learning environment required changes to curriculum design and delivery for some organizations and created challenges for facilitators to connect with learners.

The COVID-19 pandemic also affected how the organizations were able to connect with their community partners. These partners were also dealing with similar challenges as the beta-test organizations, which limited their ability to actively support the beta-test projects, as described by one of the leads: "We have a list of potential speakers, but COVID affected that as well in terms of who would come in or who we would ask." It also halted the development of some partnerships or prevented the development of new partner initiatives beyond the ideation phase. One beta-test lead described how this was the case with one of their potential partners with whom they were going to integrate programming, but this idea never came to fruition because of various factors related to the pandemic. As they shared, "[the potential community partner] was also going to put in a [programming component similar to the beta test]. I don't think they ended up doing it. They had been in some community meetings where they heard about [our beta test], so I think they wanted to put it into their LES training. We were potentially going to help them with some of that content, but it never got going because of COVID."

The challenges stemming from the requirements to respond to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic stretched the capacity of many of the beta-test organizations and challenged their operations and resources. However, as was discussed in many of the beta-test lead interviews, the beta-test organizations were typically able to respond to these challenges through innovative approaches by working with their partners and relying on the resiliency and compassion of their team members and community partners to support growth and positive change for learners and their communities.

COMMON APPROACHES ACROSS BETA TESTS

As mentioned throughout the report, the overall goal of the beta-testing phase of the project was to uncover and disseminate evidence-based LES supports, training approaches, and promising practices that can inform the development of programs and models to improve the employability of displaced workers in rural and remote across Canada. It should be emphasized, though, that the purpose of this research was not to compare the success of the different beta-test sites, but rather to identify the factors that contributed to program success and the areas that could be improved, from both an individual site and cross-project perspective. The previous two sections focused on learner and organization outcomes, potential areas for improvement or growth, as well as what factors led to certain challenges. This next section now brings together the findings from the previous sections and discusses some of the key common approaches used across the sites that contributed to these outcomes. These include elements of both placed-based and learner-centred approaches.

PLACE-BASED APPROACH

The key feature of place-based approaches is that they are community-centred and based on the understanding that "people who live in a community truly know their problems and they are also the ones who are the key to the solutions" (Gadsby & Samson, 2016, p. 10). This is particularly important in a rural context because programs in rural communities are more likely to be effective when they are designed around the unique needs of communities and reflective of local assets, capacities, and socioeconomic conditions (Reimer & Markey, 2008). While place-based approaches vary in scale and focus, the key elements of these approaches include multi-sectoral stakeholders, leveraging local knowledge and assets, shared stakeholder ownership of the initiatives (Bellefontaine & Wisener, 2011), and community engagement (Gadsby & Samson, 2016). Common practices across the beta-test sites related to place-based approaches included leveraging local and regional assets through multi-sectoral community-based partnerships and leveraging local knowledge of the community.

Leveraging local and regional assets

The beta-test projects involved a variety of community-based partnerships with groups and organizations from different sectors in the community (e.g., social services, education and training, employment, information services, corporate services, etc.), as a way to leverage local and regional assets to support learners. The beta-test organizations were able to utilize these partnerships to integrate different areas of expertise in the training programs, as well as give

learners the opportunity to connect to other local supports and services. For instance, Lethbridge Public Library's beta-test project was led by the local library and involved partnerships with other departments with the City of Lethbridge, Lethbridge College, Economic Development Lethbridge, and multiple employers in the community (e.g., McCain Foods and Maple Leaf Foods). These community-based partners provided mentorship to learners, training and job preparation coaching for learners, and shared resources and information about their services and employment opportunities.

Another example are the partnerships formed within the Campbell River Literacy Association's beta test, which included North Island Employment Foundations Society (NIEFS), a regional organization, and Gold River Literacy Society, a local organization. The partnership with NIEFS created an opportunity for learners to become more aware of the employment and retraining services available to them in the region, make personal connections to staff members from the organization, and hear from a guest speaker about career planning and employment services. The partnership with the Literacy Society provided space in Gold River to house new computers and host the training. This partnership was also a way for the beta-test lead to become more connected within Gold River, but also for the Literacy Society to expand their reach within the community by having technology available for community members to use.

Leveraging local knowledge

All of the beta-test organizations also leveraged local knowledge to develop, design, and implement the training programs. The beta-test organizations were either themselves well-connected and rooted within the communities or partnered with individuals who were as previously described. Typically, this process of leveraging local knowledge started with the beta-test lead or another staff member from the organization who had a strong connection to the community. This was a critical part of each beta test, as it meant that the programs were developed with a deep understanding of the context and needs of the community, as well as an understanding of potential community partners.

For example, the initial idea for the Palliser Regional Library beta test came from an understanding of socioeconomic changes in the community and the impacts that this type of change had previously had on workers in the community. This community experienced a mine closure within the last five years that led to many displaced workers with limited job search skills. There were also plans to close the powerplant in the community and, understanding the life altering impacts that the mine closure had on workers previously, the beta test was going to help address the low LES and job preparation skills of powerplant workers. The powerplant closure did not end up happening for various reasons; however, the community context was an important part of the design of Palliser's beta test.

The idea for the Mount Waddington Family Literacy Society beta test emerged in a similar way. Shortly before the start of the DWLES a mill closed in that region. One of the beta-test leads had a deep understanding of who was affected by the closure, what skills they were missing, and how there was a lack of understanding among many of the displaced workers as to how their skills would be transferable to other jobs. The beta test was developed with this knowledge in mind and with plans to leverage local assets, which were the various community organizations that had the capacity and resources to support these workers.

To highlight how two elements of place-based approaches emerged across the beta-test sites, below is an example of the Capilano University beta test that integrated multi-sectoral community-based partnerships and the leveraging of local knowledge into the development and implementation of the training.

The Capilano University beta test was located in Líl̓wat First Nation and N'Quatqua First Nation. Capilano University, and the beta-test lead in particular, have a strong understanding of the communities. They are not outsiders to the communities, but have strong relationships and an understanding of the needs of learners who live in those communities. They work closely with the two First Nations, including having an office and offering programming at the Ts'zil Learning Centre. The beta test included multiple partners, primarily Líl̓wat First Nation, which owns the Ts'zil Learning centre where the beta-test lead's office was located and where the training was held. There was also the opportunity to leverage its capacity as a regional educational institution and the many resources and supports associated with this position. Partners included in the beta test also included community members and small businesses. Business owners from Líl̓wat and N'Quatqua First Nations presented to learners in the program to share their experiences and learnings related to entrepreneurship. The beta-test lead leveraged their connections within the community and chose these businesses to ensure that the examples provided were reflective of the learners' communities and experiences.

Elements of place-based approaches were common across all the beta-test projects and were critical for helping learners and organizations achieve outcomes related to increased skills, capacity, and resiliency. Placed-based approaches enabled the beta-test organizations to identify skills gaps in the communities, adapt to changing socioeconomic and health contexts in the communities, and leverage connections with community members and organizations to facilitate wraparound supports to learners.

LEARNER-CENTRED APPROACH

The beta-test organizations were also all informed by elements of a learner centred approach, which can be described as a holistic approach to supporting learners and individually tailoring support and programming through the process of developing relationships with learners (de

Raaf, Luo, Montenegro, & Wray, 2020). This meant that learners were not only supported to build and improve their skills, but also that they had support through the training programs for their broader well-being, including physical and mental health, family life and community connection.

Holistic approach to supporting learners

All of the beta-test projects integrated a holistic approach in their development and delivery. By leveraging local knowledge of the community and developing relationships with learners, the facilitators were able to identify not just the learning needs of displaced workers in the community, but also the broader, wraparound supports that learners would need in order to participate and engage in the training programs and in the labour market in the future.

Identifying learning needs of displaced workers

Expanding upon the practice of leveraging local knowledge to develop the training programs, the beta-test leads utilized a holistic approach to supporting learners by, first, identifying the specific learning needs of displaced workers in their communities. For example, some beta-test projects specifically included a mental health component because the leads and facilitators recognized the important connection between mental health and employment outcomes. The beta-test project developed by the Fort Nelson Community Literacy Society had a strong focus on mental health that included stress management, mindfulness, and other self-care practices, in addition to LES and employment related training. Based on staff members' knowledge of the community and the needs of learners they worked with on a daily basis, they identified that many people had the technical skills and training to find jobs, but that many were not able to retain employment due to trauma, addictions, and other mental health issues. While they had offered a number of LES programs in the community previously, the staff recognized a need for a program that took a holistic approach to LES programming for displaced workers that helped them build their technical skills (e.g., digital skills, workforce tickets), while also supporting their mental health needs. To help facilitate this in the beta test, they partnered with a mental health professional to deliver some of the mental health content.

Supporting learners' broader well-being

Beyond specific program content, all of the beta-test projects supported learners' broader well-being. Some provided meals for learners, which provided learners with food, but also an opportunity to socialize with the facilitator and other learners. Some were able to connect learners with services in their community to support their health. All beta-test projects provided an accommodating and welcoming learning environment, so that learners who could were

unable to leave their home could still participate in the virtual training. For example, there were some beta-test learners who were mothers with young children, or infants, at home, but they could still participate in the training while tending to their children's needs. As described in the Key Findings Related to Learners section, most learners reported that they felt their participation in the beta test improved their well-being. This suggests that the holistic approach was particularly effective for contributing to learners' self-reported outcomes.

Individually tailored support and programming

The majority of beta-test organizations also integrated individually tailored support and programming into the training. This meant that supports and aspects of the programming were individually tailored to each learner's particular needs in order to engage individual interest and commitment, and to be meaningful and applicable in terms of achieving their goals. This required conducting a detailed and holistic needs assessment of each learner at the initial stages of the training that assessed skills gaps and needs, but also broader areas such as physical and mental health, family life and work context.

In addition to the initial needs assessments, leads and facilitators also incorporated individually tailored support and programming by:

- Checking in with learners individually during or outside of class. This was done by contacting learners who were absent to see how they were doing and if they needed additional or specific support. For example, the facilitator for the Adult Languages and Learning beta test would call or send a message to learners if they did not show up for class to identify if there was a way in which the learner could be supported or motivated to attend.

- Responding to learners' feedback, interests, and learning needs on program content and delivery. For example, this was done by slowing down the pace of teaching or adding relevant content and examples based on learners' self-identified interests or capacities. During the Autumn Services Fraser Lake beta test, some learners expressed a strong interest in continuing their education. In response to this interest, the facilitator invited a representative from the local college to meet with the learners and discuss potential study plans with them. The representative met with the learners and encouraged them to reach out to continue the discussion.

- Adapting program materials and content to align with learners' needs and access to resources. Initially, the Campbell River Literacy Association beta test in Gold River was going to teach learners how to use Microsoft 365. After recognizing that learners did not all have access to that outside of the classroom, the training shifted to Google applications (e.g., Google Docs, Google Sheets, Gmail, etc.), so that learners could access it for free beyond the classroom.

- Providing one-on-one learning opportunities to learners outside of the regular group learning setting. This was used when learners struggled with a certain concept or specific learning activities, missed a class for family or health reasons and needed additional support to catch up, or needed specific feedback or support with a job application. For example, in some beta-test projects, each class ended 30 minutes early so that learners could stay behind for additional, individual support from the facilitator, if needed.

When discussing initial findings with beta-test leads, they indicated that they were not surprised that using a learner-centred approach was an emerging theme, as it is central to their work as literacy practitioners. Interestingly, however, the importance of using this approach was also reflected in focus groups with learners. While, the operationalization of an effective learner-centred approach varied across beta-test projects, the *importance* of its use was a point of connection across all programs.

SUMMARY

The findings of this research suggest that two important aspects of programs that aim to improve the employability of displaced workers across Canada are that they are place-based and learner-centred. This means that the context, assets, and needs of the community are considered in program ideation and development and that the individual learning and broader well-being needs and experiences of each learner are considered in the program delivery. This project highlighted that despite the diversity of beta-test models, these were at the core of each beta test.

These two overarching approaches – place-based and learner-centred program development – are not new and a key feature of most community-based literacy programs. However, this research highlighted how truly important these approaches were for creating a training atmosphere that was relevant, welcoming, and inclusive for learners in rural and remote communities that were experiencing significant socioeconomic, infrastructure, and demographic changes, among others. These approaches were critical for engaging learners, motivating them to participate, and building their confidence to engage in activities that were designed to enhance their labour market resiliency and success. This was a critical starting point where learners, who have often struggled in a classroom setting, are able to learn key essential skills, gain confidence in their abilities, and take the next steps towards improving their employment prospects and overall wellbeing.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

COMMUNITY-LEVEL

- The beta-test projects provided an opportunity for local organizations to further understand and address the lack of access to, and availability of, LES programming in their communities in a variety of ways, whether through filling gaps in local programs and services, providing computer and internet access through the development of a community IT hub, or enhancing access to online programming.

- The project development and implementation process led to new or strengthened partnerships between different organizations in the community, particularly between the literacy organizations and employment and training organizations. While some beta-test organizations were able to partner with individual employers, this was very preliminary and as such represents one key area which could benefit from further attention in future piloting.

ORGANIZATION AND PROJECT-LEVEL

- The model of the project – small scale beta-test projects – was valuable for the beta-test organizations as it enabled them to try new and innovative programming without significant risk. This allowed them to focus more attention on developing and refining their programs rather than recruiting large numbers of learners. This was especially important given the impact of the pandemic on the organizations' ability to recruit program participants. It should be noted, however, that the opportunity to innovate posed challenges for the beta-test organizations related to their limited resources, time, and capacity.

- There was value for the beta-test organizations in being part of a larger project that had common objectives and outcomes, but where they still had the autonomy to develop, design, and deliver a program that fit with the needs of their communities and the learners who participated in their programs. The project was an opportunity to validate their organizational experiences with evidence from the evaluation and use the project outputs and learnings to enhance their programming.

- The beta-test projects resulted in an increased capacity of beta-test organizations to connect with new learners who had not previously accessed their services or attended their programming, and who they will hopefully continue to support beyond the project.

- The opportunities for beta-test organizations to learn and network with other organizations provincially and nationally helped to support them throughout the project, sharing successes, as well as challenges. The beta-test organizations shared that they seldom have the opportunity to come together to share different ideas and approaches. This project provided an opportunity to do so (as highlighted throughout by the promising practices), and the beta site leads shared that they hoped that this network would continue in the future.

- The project's approach to research and evaluation – having an evaluation partner embedded within the project design – increased the research and evaluation capacity of the beta-test organizations. Using individualized and contextualized evaluation approaches to capture the findings across the project sites allowed for a better understanding of the outcomes of each individual beta-test project, but also an opportunity to pool data across the beta-test projects in order to share out some key metrics. The theories of change allowed SRDC to work with programs where they were at by understanding their strengths, resources, and capacity.

LEARNER-LEVEL

- Participation rates were lower than expected, primarily due to the complex challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the beta-test organizations showed tremendous resilience, adapting and finding solutions to carry on with the beta-test projects through a very challenging time.

- Learners across the beta-test sites were diverse. Equity-deserving groups were well represented in the beta-test projects, such as women, Indigenous peoples, English as second language, and newcomers, particularly due to the fact that several beta-test organizations specifically focused on engaging representatives from these groups in their communities.

- By utilizing a learner-centred approach (addressing learning needs and broader well-being needs, and tailoring supports to meet these), the beta-test leads and facilitators were able to engage learners in the training programs and help them achieve learning outcomes. The evaluation demonstrated that overall, learners were well-supported and highly engaged across all of the programs. Outcomes included:

    - Most learners experienced gains in skills after completing their training;

    - Learners made substantial gains in IT skills, as well as confidence in using their skills;

  - Learners demonstrated increased participation (primarily setting goals, organize, reflection, and engagement components) and communication skills both directly (e.g., such as their ability to give presentations) and indirectly (e.g., their increased engagement in group discussions).

- Social supports, through relationships with other learners and the facilitators, was critical in many instances for building learners' self confidence, fostering their sense of belonging, and contributing to other aspects of their well-being, including hope for the future, self-esteem, sense of connection to their community, and satisfaction with life in general.

- The outcomes evaluation showed preliminary indications that the best test programs contributed to learners enhancing their labour market resiliency and potential for success by increasing their career planning and job search and preparation skills, as well becoming more aware of, and confident in using resources and services in their communities that focus on skills development and employment.

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