



2015-2016 AESN Case Study

School: Cowichan Secondary

District: #79 Cowichan Valley

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Our focus for this year: This project focused on (a) enhancing leadership skills in Aboriginal high school students and (b) improving transitions for Aboriginal students by recruiting and working with Aboriginal students from the high school to mentor elementary school children on the playground during lunch.

Scanning: At the high school level we noticed that some of our Aboriginal learners were not socially engaged and in conversations with them we learned that they wanted more opportunities to contribute to their local community. Several of these students had also previously participated in an Aboriginal Leadership course and were eager to apply these skills in meaningful ways. From conversations with some of the elementary school principals near our school we have learned that some of their students needed help managing unstructured time during lunch. The challenges at lunch seemed to be centered around inconsistency with the rules of commonly played games, like four square, and a limited number of games that students were knowledgeable enough about to play independently. We felt that these two challenges may in fact be opportunities to address both of our concerns.

Focus: The plan was to allow high school students to build on their leadership skills and develop a greater sense of empowerment. At the elementary school we hoped there would be a decrease in the number and degree of discipline issues resulting from playground behavior and a long-term increase in the transition rates from elementary school all the way up to high school.

Hunch: Our hope was that through service learning as playground coaches our high school students could build on their leadership skills and develop a greater sense of empowerment. This cross grade project would be an example of the First People's Principle of the generational roles and responsibilities in learning. At the elementary school we hoped there would be a decrease in the number and degree of discipline issues resulting from playground behavior. The high school playground mentors were to focus their conversations about fair play on "recognizing the consequences of one's actions (First People's Principles of Learning)". The negative consequences of behavior as described by the playground coaches would not be punishment, rather the breaking of relationships and the loss of joy in playing together with friends. Our final goal was to build bridges between elementary school students and high school students with the hope that this would increase the long-term transition rates from elementary school all the way up to high school.

New professional learning: This project involved three schools, Alexander Elementary, Maple Bay Elementary and Cowichan Secondary. As schools, we will need to learn how to come

together to plan support for our students. The adults involved found that email was a good initial way to communicate but eventually needed some face-to-face time to plan the details. Playground coaches needed some pre-training around popular playground games, the boundaries/expectations of the two elementary school campuses, and how to respond when kids are exhibiting poor playground behavior.

Taking action:

1-- Recruiting "Playground Coaches" from the high school.

This was done in several ways: announcements, approaching individual students, meeting with our First Nations students as a group at lunch and connecting with our Leadership class. In the end the volunteers were all non-Aboriginal though most of the elementary students were Aboriginal. The playground coaches' ability to participate on given days varied as all of them had other extra-curricular commitments in addition to playground coaches. Some students had to stop participating when their schedules became overloaded. But a core group of six students was determined to continue and even managed to recruit additional members.

2--Site visits to the elementary schools.

Before taking the playground coaches to work as mentors at the elementary schools, we took a tour of the two sites. Each of the schools had "off-limits" areas and problem areas. We needed to identify them. We also learned which activities students already participated in and which activities were of concern to school staff.

3--Relearning playground games and their rules.

The playground coaches researched and practiced several commonly played games to make sure that they knew the rules before we visited the schools. The high school students really enjoyed this exercise. Grounders was a new game to several of them and four-square quickly became a friendly competition.

4--School visits.

In the end we were only able to complete our project with one of our elementary schools, Alexander. Maple Bay was too far away and, as their lunch hour was different than ours, it became too hard to schedule visits. Most of the playground coaches had senior academic courses (Physics, Pre-Calculus and Social Studies) at that time and so were unable to miss class time to do school visits. The project continued with just Alexander Elementary which happened to be the school with the larger Aboriginal population.

It was amazing. The high school students and the elementary students quickly started playing together. Some formed small groups, even one-on-one with children, while others formed massive groupings of 30+. Every time we visited there were smiles all around, the noon hour supervisors included. It was wonderful to see how eager the small kids were to have the attention of the big kids. Seeing how gentle 200-pound high school rugby players could be with kindergarten kids on the swings was another delight. At the end of each visit we had to leave time to hug goodbye to the kindergartens. It was very special.

Checking: We did not include a pre and post assessment as part of our project. Interviewing participants at both schools would have been a good way to measure this. But based on anecdotal comments from the playground coaches and the noon hour supervisors we can surmise that the project was successful. The students from the two schools have clearly connected. The high school students are already talking about how to grow the program next year. They also independently recognized the need to broaden the demographic of the coaching group to include Aboriginal leaders. Anecdotally there appeared to be fewer incidents requiring discipline on the playground on days when the playground coaches were present. We will never know if the transition rates to high school will be impacted as a direct result of this

project but it is evident that the elementary students see the high school students as their friends and allies.

Reflections/Advice: Playground coaches have proved to be a rewarding experience for all of our learners. They clearly look forward to their Tuesday lunches together. Scheduling mutual lunches is a challenge and should be considered before engaging in this work. Playground coaches would also benefit from more training in new co-operative games to teach kids at the elementary school. We need to reflect more on ways we can engage Aboriginal secondary students to participate as playground coaches so they too can be role models.