



NATIONAL CRIME PREVENTION CENTRE

GWICH'IN OUTDOOR CLASSROOM PROJECT

Gwich'in Outdoor Classroom project was a culture-based crime prevention program in the communities of Fort McPherson and Aklavik, Northwest Territories. The project was designed for Aboriginal children aged 6 to 12, living in remote northern communities. Participating children faced multiple risk factors associated with crime, such as a lack of attachment to school and to community role models, addictions, involvement in youth gangs and lack of parental support.



The main components of the project included an outdoor camp, a morning breakfast program, and in-school programming involving life and communication skills, Elders, and traditional learning. The morning breakfast program, not part of the original project proposal, was added in response to a need identified in the community.

Project assessment

Process and outcome evaluations were conducted. Methods of data collection included interviews, standardized tests of children's functioning, informal community and regional discussions and program observation. Evaluators paid particular attention to cultural and environmental factors during the data collection phase.

The evaluation was based on collected pre- and post-test data. In total, 112 participants took part in the evaluation including a comparison group in the Aklavik community.

Key findings

The process evaluation showed that:

- Participation rates decreased towards the end of the project, mostly due to changes in the administration of the project and the role of the advisory group;

- Project implementation, community support and participant engagement were achieved, despite high rates of staff turnover;
- The project's major strength was its emphasis on culture-based crime prevention programming that was culturally relevant and encompassed Gwich'in traditions, values and customs;
- The Outdoor Classroom Project was well accepted by the Gwich'in community and some activities of this project are continuing such as the Outdoor Classroom, the morning breakfast program and the social skills program.

The outcome evaluation showed that:

- The Outdoor Classroom Project was more effective with boys than girls. The project increased the development of positive social skills in boys aged 6 to 9;
- A significant difference in school achievement levels (reading, math and spelling) was found for both boys and girls at the intervention site compared to those in the comparison site;
- The morning breakfast program improved school attendance rates. The evaluation found a 20 % difference in monthly school attendance rates between the control and experimental group;



- Teachers from the intervention site reported that 75% of students who performed below the average grade level in the standard classroom, outperformed their peers when learning cultural skills in the outdoor classroom.

Lessons learned

Lessons learned included:

- A collaborative approach is essential to developing culturally appropriate school and community-based interventions;
- A strong project advisory group that is active through the project is vital to ensure project continuity and integration;
- The morning breakfast program was an important aspect of the project;
- Boys and girls learn social skills differently and school curricula have to be delivered differently;

- The program's model must be evidence-based, consistent with local practices and beliefs, user-friendly and integrated into an existing setting such as a school or community program;
- Trust between the evaluators, partners and stakeholders of the community is essential to the evaluation;
- It is important to educate staff management about evaluation, including the use of statistics and data collection methods, consent forms and procedures.

Conclusion

The Gwich'in Outdoor Classroom is a promising crime prevention model. This project combined the Gwich'in tradition and contemporary social skills instruction.

Overall, there was a significant improvement in school achievement for both boys and girls and it was successful in helping boys aged 6 to 9 years to develop positive social skills. Programs that positively influence school attendance, such as the morning breakfast program, may be essential to increase the participation of children at-risk.

For more information or to receive a copy of the final evaluation report please contact the National Crime Prevention Centre at 1-877-302-6272, or visit our website at: www.PublicSafety.gc.ca/NCPC.

You can also visit the website of Gwich'in Outdoor Classroom Project at: www.tetlitgwichin.ca/crimeprevention.

If you wish to register for the NCPC mailing list to receive information from the Centre please visit the subscription page at: www.PublicSafety.gc.ca/prg/cp/maillinglist/subscribe-en.aspx.