First Nations Learners and Extracurricular Activities  
Barriers And Bridges To Participation  

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You talk big words of integration in the schools. Does it really exist? … unless there is integration of the hearts and minds, you have only a physical presence…and the walls are as high as the mountain range.  
—Chief Dan George, c. 1972

Traditionally, our people’s teaching addresses the total being, the whole community, in context of a viable living culture.  
—Kirkness, 1985

Our study emerges as a result of the troubling statistics on the dropout rates and overall low academic performance among First Nations students in inner city Vancouver schools. Many studies have found that First Nations youth have poor school achievement in relation to
their non-First Nations peers; (BC Progress Board 2003; Ministry of Education, 2003; Statistics Canada, 2001). These studies have only confirmed what many of Vancouver’s teachers witness on a daily basis in inner city schools. As teacher/researchers, we began to wonder what more could be done to improve the dire situation for this population. Our shared experiences informed us that many of our First Nations students did not actively participate in extracurricular activities offered by the schools. In addition, those who did participate at the elementary school level seemed to drop off at the high school level.

In the course of our investigation we found a significant amount of research concerned with extracurricular participation and the associated benefits for students. While the correlation between extracurricular participation and academic success has been well established, there is a dearth of research knowledge on extracurricular participation and First Nations students. Although there are numerous studies addressing the benefits of extracurricular activities for students, there is no research on how current studies might apply to First Nations students in particular, nor is there discussion of the current barriers that exist for this group. In addition, there were no identifiable First Nations researchers conducting research in this area.

While many studies addressing the educational difficulties facing First Nations students recommend a culturally appropriate pedagogy for First Nations students (Dawson, 1988; Friedel, 1999; Kirkness, 1998; Smith, 1999; Van Hamme, 1995), few studies have acknowledged the value of extracurricular participation in keeping First Nations students connected to school. However, there is a recent BC Ministry of Education initiative, (Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements, 2003), attempting to deal with the dismal statistics for First Nations youth. In it, the provincial government imposes structure and accountability on school boards and recommends strategies for success. Among the strategies, they have listed “development/participation in extracurricular activities” (16). The Ministry’s recommendation echoes that of the American Bureau of Indian Affairs’ Effective Schools Team (1988) report, which recommends the use of extracurricular participation rates as a systemic indicator in the evaluation of Native education (cited in Butterfield, 1994). Clearly, the BC Ministry of Education and the Bureau of Indian Affairs acknowledge the value of extracurricular participation in the education of First Nations students.

**Research Question**

As teachers working with First Nations students, our shared experience informed us that First Nations students were experiencing success at the elementary level but not at the secondary level. Teacher-researcher Brian Ee teaches at an elementary school where the majority of students, including First Nations students, are enthusiastic participants in extracurricular activities. In contrast, Jason Lauzon and Charity Bonneau, teach at a large secondary school where First Nations students generally do not participate in extracurricular activities. Interestingly, one of the researchers, Charity Bonneau, is a member of the Okanagan First Nation. Charity teaches a First Nations program and provides a much-needed perspective on this important issue.

Studies have shown a positive correlation between participation in extracurricular activities and school success (Camp, 1990; Gerber, 1996; Marsh, 1992). More importantly, participation in extracurricular activities may improve self-esteem and foster a sense of belonging (Coladarci & Cobb, 1996; Duncan, 2000; Gilman, 2001). These findings are especially important as they relate to the First Nations’ student population simply because of the noticeably low participation rate in school activities among that group. Given the benefits of participation in extracurricular activities and the low participation rate among
First Nations students, it is important to ask: are there barriers preventing First Nations students from participating in school-based extracurricular activities, and if so, what are they?

The purpose of this study is to address these questions and perhaps shed light on the barriers to participation in extracurricular activities and identify bridges that could assist in developing a more positive learning environment for First Nations students.

**Literature Review**

**Big words of integration**

Statistics Canada’s *Aboriginal Peoples Survey* (2001) shows that forty-eight percent of Aboriginals did not complete secondary school compared to twenty-six percent of non-Aboriginals. In British Columbia, a recent report entitled, *How are We Doing? Demographics and Performance of Aboriginal Students in BC Public Schools*, put together by the Ministry of Education (2003) found that in 2002, only forty-three percent of British Columbia’s First Nations students completed high school compared to seventy-nine percent of non-First Nations students (p.26). In urban areas, the statistics are even more disturbing; the BC Progress Board’s, *Measuring BC Performance* (2003) revealed that less than twenty percent of First Nations students completed secondary school compared to eighty-two percent non-First Nations learners.

**Walls as high as the Mountain range**

A number of researchers have attributed the lack of academic success and the high dropout rate among First Nations students to a theory of “cultural discontinuity” (Wilson, 1992). This theory suggests minority children experience failure when confronted with the different communication style and cultural expectations of the Western school system (St. Germaine, 1995). This hypothesis has been criticized by some Native researchers as a “cultural deprivation” theory, as it positions First Nations cultures as inferior to mainstream culture, thus depriving First Nations children of the ability to succeed (Hookimaw-Witt, 1998).

The cultural discontinuity theory, however, does not explain why dropout patterns of First Nations youth closely resemble that of non-First Nations youth, or why dropout rates among First Nations groups vary widely depending on the economic circumstances of the family (Brady, 1996). Brady argues that a family’s low socio-economic status is a more significant factor in the decision of youth to leave school than the idea of cultural discontinuity. Other researchers have also identified low socio-economic status and the social ills that accompany it as increasing the likelihood of low achievement and eventual dropout for youths of all ethnicities (Clarke 1997; Hull, 1990; Ledlow, 1992). Many First Nations youth live in conditions that are frequently impacted by poverty; studies have found that Aboriginal children in Canada are the most likely minority groups to live in poverty (Brade, Duncan & Sokal, 2003). As a result, many of these youth face difficulty in overcoming poor economic conditions and difficult home lives (van der Woerd & Cox, 2003). The difficulties faced by many First Nations students in the school system may be more attributable to socio-economic status than to any cultural considerations, though undoubtedly cultural difference is a factor in the sense of disconnectedness experienced by many Native dropouts.

Researchers have found that dropouts report feeling alienated from the school system (Brady, 1996; Kehoe & Echols, 1994; Tonkin, Murphy, van der Woerd, Poon, Liebel,
Katzenstein & Veitch, 2000; van der Woerd & Cox, 2003). First Nations youth are particularly at risk of feeling alienated, as many First Nations youth frequently encounter racist attitudes and behaviour that undermine their self-esteem (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). While schools have moved to eradicate obvious signs of racism, a subtler message of cultural inferiority may be apparent in what the curriculum leaves out. Brade et al. (2003) note that children “are made keenly aware that this particular minority group has been considered less desirable, less intelligent, less worthy and just generally less than any other group in North America” (329). In a study by Kehoe and Echols (1994), all cultural groups tested reported a greater sense of belonging than did First Nations students. Van Hamme (1995) and Curwen Doige (2003) suggest that a part of the problem with schools is that education for First Nations children is still characterized by a curriculum from a purely Western perspective that ignores the cultures and values of First Nations, and results in academic failure and extremely high dropout rates. The systemic discrimination is further compounded by instances of racism by peers, and the end result is that First Nations children do not feel a part of the school community.

There is increasing evidence to suggest that higher levels of achievement among First Nations students are more likely to occur if schools encouraged a sense of belonging for First Nations students. Not only should schools adopt curriculum and instruction more suitable for First Nations students (Curwen Doige, 2003; Dawson, 1988; Friedel, 1999; Kirkness, 1998; Smith, 1999; Van Hamme, 1995), but they should also foster a sense of community. Both Tonkin et al. (2000) and Strand and Peacock (2002) report that Aboriginal youth who had high levels of connection with school and community were more likely to stay in school. Kehoe and Echols (1994) suggest, “developing a greater sense of belonging to the school, on the part of Native children may be an indirect means of reducing school disaffection and subsequent dropping out” (66). However, both Tonkin et al. (2000) and Kehoe and Echols (1994) fail to suggest how First Nations students may be made to feel a greater sense of belonging within the school and community.

While there is no research that directly relates First Nations student’s achievements to extracurricular participation, it is evident from research with other cultural groups that extracurricular participation can create a sense of belonging and promote increased self-esteem. These factors have been identified as key factors in keeping First Nations engaged in school, by Native and non-native researchers alike (HeavyRunner & Morris, 1997; Kehoe & Echols, 1994; Strand & Peacock, 2002). In their study of Vancouver youth, Kehoe and Echols (1994) assert that enhanced self-esteem and more positive inter-group attitudes were worthwhile program goals to adopt. Studies based on non-First Nations populations clearly indicate that these two goals can be achieved through participation in extracurricular activities.

**Addressing the total being**

There is an abundant amount of research examining the social, emotional and academic benefits of student participation in structured, school-based extracurricular activities. In a recent Statistics Canada (2001) publication, it reported that a positive correlation existed between students who participated in extracurricular activities such as sports or clubs outside of school and increased academic achievement, higher self-esteem, and more developed social skills. These findings have been duplicated by many other studies indicating the broad benefits of participation in extracurricular activities (Duncan, 2000; Gilman, 2001).

Perhaps the most widely studied and promoted benefit of extracurricular activity is that of academic success. Studies by Camp (1990), Holloway (2000) and Marsh (1992) confirm...
the positive correlation between participation in extracurricular activities and academic achievement. In addition, Gilman (2001) found that extracurricular participation led to spending more time on homework, taking more advanced courses, and earning higher grades. While some researchers argue that the impact of extracurricular activities on academic success is temporary (Silliker & Quirk, 1997), and that it is unclear which kinds of extracurricular activities produce which kind of benefits (Eccles & Barber, 1999), there is little debate that there are benefits associated with participation in extracurricular activities. Even if the correlation between extracurricular activities and academic success is modest at best (Coladarci & Cobb, 1996), there are numerous other documented benefits, including improving self-esteem and fostering belongingness.

Skeptics of the academic significance of participation in extracurricular activities are more convinced of its relationship to increased self-esteem (Coladarci & Cobb, 1996). Widely respected research by Marsh (1992) has shown that increased participation in extracurricular activities is linked to higher self-concepts and self-esteem in students. Similarly, Gazarelli (1993) positively correlated self-concept and extracurricular activities for academically weak students. According to Mahoney and Cairns (1997) students engaged in extracurricular activities attend school more frequently, have lower dropout rates, and are less likely to misbehave at school. For marginalized populations, such as Canada’s First Nations, a more important benefit of extracurricular activity may be its impact on improving self-esteem and encouraging connections to school and community.

The effect of extracurricular participation in fostering a sense of community and belonging may perhaps be the most significant benefit for First Nations students. Gilman’s (2001) research confirms findings from several previous studies, reporting participation in extracurricular activities increases students’ feelings of commitment to school. They are also more likely to have more active friendships, peer interactions, better cooperation skills, and more student-adult relationship (Holloway, 2002). Researchers like Brown (1999) and Gilman (2001) have found extracurricular participation to be associated with adolescents’ pro-social growth resulting in stronger connection to school and less problem behaviors such as skipping out and using alcohol and drugs. They are also less likely to commit delinquent acts within the community, including engaging in substance abuse (Landers & Landers, 1978; Borden, Donnemeyer & Scheer, 2001). While there are no studies specifically examining a First Nations population, it is clear that participation in extracurricular activities has a well-documented positive impact on at-risk populations.

While there is little debate regarding the benefits of extracurricular participation, research reveals that the marginalized populations who might benefit the most from extracurricular activities are the least likely to become involved in those activities. A study by Cadwallader, Wagner & Garza (2003) implied that the impact of extracurricular participation differs for youth of different ages, socio-economic levels, racial/ethnic backgrounds, and gender, need to be carefully taken into account. This view is shared by Simpkins (2003), who singles out age and socio-economic status as the two primary determinants between active participation in extracurricular activities and beneficial outcomes. These studies echo the earlier findings of Brown (2002), who found that ethnicity played a significant factor in participation. Brown (2002) found that European-American students participated more than non-European-American students in extracurricular activities.

Furthermore, Dyson (1983) identified student transience as also having significant impact. In her study, she looked at migrant students in the United States and the problems associated with transience. Dyson found that in addition to culture and language differences, migrant students often encountered difficulties due to frequent moving, lack of
continuity in schooling, and obligations to contribute to the family financially at an early age. While no studies exist which have examined the participation of First Nations students in extracurricular activities, the reality is that these academically and socially marginal students are not represented in sports and clubs.

**Context**

The two schools involved in the study are both inner city schools located in the east side of Vancouver. One is a small elementary school of approximately 200 students and the other is a large secondary school of approximately 1750 students. The elementary school has a majority First Nations population of approximately forty-three per cent. The remaining population is made up of a range of ethnicities such as Chinese, Vietnamese, Mexican, and Nicaraguan. In contrast, the high school is more diverse, with large populations of Chinese, Southeast Asian, and Hispanic students. First Nations students make up less than ten percent of the student body. Approximately twenty percent of First Nations students from the elementary school eventually attend the high school we studied, while the remaining students attend another local high school.

As inner city schools, a significant population of each is composed of students who face economic and social barriers to school success. Students in this group often live with a single parent or guardian, survive on social assistance, live in social housing, and are more likely to experience some sort of family dysfunction. The catchment area from which both schools draw their population is a highly urbanized thoroughfare across the heart of inner city Vancouver. This busy traffic corridor features high-density living, low rent, and poverty. The area is plagued by the social problems associated with poverty, including crime, drugs, and prostitution.

Highly represented within this low socio-economic population are First Nations students. A special set of circumstances sets this population apart, which amplifies their difficulties in coping with life in the inner city. Like in other urban centers, Vancouver’s First Nations population is one characterized by low socioeconomic status and plagued by the social ills that accompany it. The Canadian Council of Social Development (2003) found that forty-six percent of Aboriginal children living in urban areas lived in a single-parent household, which is twice the national average. The same report also found that over one-third of Aboriginal children living in urban areas had moved at least once in the year. In addition, Statistics BC (1996) found that Vancouver’s Aboriginal population had an average income of just $18,345 and were more likely than non-Aboriginals to be unemployed and living in substandard housing. A life of poverty is further impacted by the higher rates of substance abuse and HIV infection among First Nations (Health Canada, 2003). Consequently, our schools’ First Nations students are more likely to be highly transient, lack family and community support, and experience higher than average drug and alcohol problems.

Studies indicate that circumstances such as these amount to pre-existing barriers to participation in extracurricular activities. Researchers such as Brown, (2002), Cadwallader et al. (2003), and Simpkins (2003) identified factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, as having significant impact on rates of extracurricular participation among student populations. Our schools support this finding. These pre-existing barriers may help to explain why over ninety percent of First Nations students attending the high school are enrolled in special education programs designed to meet their individual learning needs.

**Methods**
Research participants involved in the study were all First Nations students, both boys and girls between the ages of 9 to 15 years old. Five elementary students and ten secondary students were involved in the study. Fifteen participants were selected on the basis of their willingness to participate in the study. All participants were familiar with the researchers as their classroom teachers. Free and informed written consent of the students and parents was obtained before starting the research and research participants were given the option to withdraw from the study at any time. Data for the study was collected between February and March 2004. The data was collected through interviews, which took approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete and occurred at lunch hour or after school. For participants who were involved in extracurricular activities, the interview asks them to: 1. Identify which extracurricular activities they are involved in; 2. State how often they participate in these activities; and 3. Explain why they choose to be involved in these extracurricular activities. For participants not involved in extra-curricular activities, the interview asked them to: 1. State the reasons for not being involved in an extracurricular activity; and 2. Explain what the school might do to encourage their involvement in extracurricular activities. Using the student responses given during the interviews, we grouped the barriers into three categories: structural, academic, and social/emotional. Teaching and support staff who agreed to be interviewed were also asked to give their observations about First Nations participation in extracurricular activities and suggestions they have to encourage participation. These conversations were recorded in the form of field notes and then analyzed.

Findings—Elementary School

A split Grade Five-Six and a Six-Seven class were invited to participate in the interviews. There were approximately twenty-five First Nations students among these classes. Of the twenty students approached, only five were given parental consent to participate in the study. These five students reported a full level of participation in school-based extracurricular activities. At the outset of the interviews, students appeared hesitant to express themselves despite being familiar with the interviewer. Once the topic of extracurricular activities had been made clear, students seemed to open up. When asked why they participated in extracurricular activities, one student responded enthusiastically, “It’s fun, it keeps me busy, I learn new skills, and I get to hang out with my friends.” As a result of full participation, students did not report any structural/institutional or social/emotional barriers to participation. The First Nations students interviewed reported being very involved in extracurricular activities—especially in the Visions Athletic After-School Program (“Visions”). One student reported proudly that, “My school’s got tons of stuff for us to do like going to Science World, Harry Potter Club, and other after-school clubs. We even have sports like lacrosse, Steve Nash basketball, and even karate!” They reported being happy to participate with their friends.

Despite the small sample of students interviewed, teachers confirmed that participation levels in the various after-school extracurricular activities are always full to near capacity. They pointed to the “Visions” program that provided structured, all-inclusive activities to students in Grades Five to Seven. Nearly all of the sixty-five eligible students are registered and participate regularly.

The only identified barrier to participating in school-based extracurricular activities reported was students’ difficulty deciding on which of the wide variety of activities being offered they should choose. During the interviews it became clear that as long as the activities were fun and kept students busy, students were more than happy to participate.

The elementary school staff has a generally positive opinion of the participation of First Nations students in extracurricular activities. The staff has recognized the need for...
extracurricular activities and feels that the elementary school with its adoption of the “Visions” program is doing an excellent job in providing a variety of diverse activities for the students. One teacher noted, “Extracurricular activities help to promote that sense of belonging. You also gain a sense of accomplishment and pride in self, which in turn, promotes greater success in academics.” Another teacher offered, “First Nations students will definitely have greater success academically if they participate in extracurricular activities because it helps their self-esteem, their sense of belonging to a group, it keeps them in good shape which in turn helps their focus in class, and very importantly, they develop a connection with an adult of significance to them.”

Findings—High School

In contrast to the elementary school, high school students interviewed reported a low overall level of participation in school-based extracurricular activities. Only three of the ten students interviewed reported any involvement. Interestingly, nine out of the ten students interviewed reported active participation at the elementary school level. Among the students not actively participating, they uniformly expressed an interest in increasing their school-based participation. Students displayed a willingness to speak about the topic and disclose the various barriers they perceived as preventing their participation. The primary barriers to participation were structural and social/emotional, with little indication that there were any academic barriers.

Many student responses indicated they had encountered structural/institutional barriers that were preventing their participation in extracurricular activities. Student responses indicated a communication deficit within the school whereby they were often unaware of opportunities and/or sign-up times. Students commented that they were unaware of announcements and did not often see posters advertising try-outs. In one interview with a Grade Nine student, he was asked to identify an activity that he would participate in that was not offered by the high school. He thought for a moment, then his face lit up, “Wrestling! I really love wrestling. And I’m good at it. You should see me in PE. I even took down the teacher.” He was amazed when I informed him that the high school actually had an all-grade wrestling team. In fact, the wrestling team was sponsored by a First Nations Youth and Family worker with whom he had a positive relationship.

Sometimes structural barriers can become social/emotional barriers. A surprising finding was that eight out of ten First Nations students interviewed reported at least one attempt to get involved in extracurricular activities. Unfortunately, many experienced the competitiveness of too few teams for too many students. As a result, most reported being cut from teams. In one instance a Grade Nine student completed the interview and in a parting comment he confessed, “Well… I did try out for one team…basketball…I didn’t make it. It’s okay. I didn’t really want to play anyway. I play with my friends after school.” When asked if he would be willing to try out for the team next year, he replied, “I don’t think so. I’m probably not good enough.” Initial rejection was seen to become a significant barrier to participation. That is, students who attempted to get involved and were rejected, uniformly did not continue to get involved.

There did not appear to be any significant academic barriers to participation. Students did not report being excluded from clubs or sports due to low academic achievement or pressure to achieve higher grades interfered with participation. However, there were some students who reported that their participation in extracurricular activities was hindered by the amount of homework they received in their classes; they received so much homework that they felt there wasn’t enough time to also participate in sports or clubs.
The findings revealed however some important ‘bridges’ for participation: peer involvement, high skill ability, and positive relationship with coach and/or sponsor. Three of the students interviewed were on school-sponsored sports teams. All claimed to have superior skills in the activity they were involved in. Knowledge of coach/sponsor was also factor. Three students reported that knowing a teacher/or sponsor was a major factor in their participation.

The highest correlating factor for First Nations Students’ participation in extra-curricular activities was the involvement of peers; especially close friends, in a particular sport or club. Students reported a significant desire to join activities when their friends were also involved. Students were also found to have responded positively to personal invitations from teachers and peers to join activities. This finding is supported by research done by Stevens & Peltier (1994), which found that students were more likely to participate if they felt important and were invited.

Teachers who were consulted informally during the study echoed the reports of the students. Specifically, they recognized the lack of participation of First Nations students and expressed a need for the school to do something to address the problem. Although many staff had personal knowledge of one or two students who were involved in extracurricular activities, it was widely observed that First Nations students are not involved proportionate to their numbers within the school.

**Discussion**

At the outset of our study, our focus was primarily on encouraging the potential academic benefits of participation; however, the many non-academic benefits of participation documented in our literature review have only strengthened our argument for increasing First Nations students’ participation in our schools. In our review of the literature, we successfully found numerous studies pointing to the positive correlation between active participation in extracurricular activities and increased academic achievement from which we premised our study (Camp, 1990; Gerber, 1996; Marsh, 1992). Beyond this we uncovered evidence supporting further benefits of active participation in structured school-based activities such as increased self-esteem and social skills.

Our study was successful in revealing a variety of social/emotional as well as structural barriers to First Nations learners’ participation in extracurricular activities. Key social/emotional barriers included: discouragement after being cut from teams, perceived over-competitiveness of high school sports, and having no positive connection with coaches or sponsors. Key structural/institutional barriers included: limited space on teams and students being unaware of opportunities.

In addition, our study revealed bridges of access to participation for First Nations students. At the high school level, the social/emotional barriers appeared to be overcome or ‘bridged’ by three factors: close peer involvement in activities, perceived above average skill ability in specific activity, and developing a positive connection with coaches or sponsors.

**Breaking down the walls**

Interestingly, both factors bridge the low self-esteem barrier. Studies, such as Marsh’s (1992), have identified the positive correlation between increased self-esteem and active participation. That is, students who participate tend to have high self-esteem and typically, those students with high self-esteem tend to be the ones participating.
The importance of self-esteem goes beyond simply increasing the likelihood of participation in extracurricular activities; it also encourages a sense of belonging. Specifically, participation in school-based activities fosters a student’s sense of belonging with the larger school population (Duncan, 2000; Gilman, 2001). This is especially important as many First Nations students at risk of dropping out reported that they did not feel a sense of belonging at school (Tonkin et al. 2000).

Thus our study indicates that the lack of belonging that students reported experiencing in our schools is the barrier. These experiences are intensified as the students enter high school—especially one with over 1700 students. Coladarci and Cobb (1996) found that school size was the greatest determinant of participation for both boys and girls—a factor more powerful than students’ socio-economic status, academic achievement, or self-esteem. Coladarci and Cobb (1996) report that a large school size creates feelings of disconnectedness among the student population. Findings such as this may help to explain the apparent drop-off in participation from elementary to secondary school, the observation prompting this investigation. It can be argued that all students experience feelings of disconnectedness. We assert, however, that it is the special circumstances of inner city First Nations students that make them less likely to participate. Therefore special interventions need to be made.

Unfortunately, there were no bridges for the structural/institutional barriers reported at the high school level. Students who were unable to participate in their Grade Eight year due to limited space on teams did not continue to pursue activities.

With widespread participation of First Nations students at the elementary school level reported, these social/emotional as well as structural/institutional barriers appeared to have been bridged. We know that the elementary school has the Visions Athletics After-School program in place. We then posed the question: What is it about this program that successfully encourages the participation of First Nations students?

**Visions Athletic After-School Program—Integrating hearts and minds**

The Visions Athletic After-School program, (“Visions”), is a corporately funded initiative adopted by the elementary school we studied intended to engage students physically and academically after school hours. (Similar corporately funded initiatives are operating in Vancouver at three other inner-city elementary schools, two community centers, and two neighborhood houses.) Initiated by the school’s principal in 2001, the program has been operating for the past three years on a four-year $100,000 (approx.) grant. It has been successful in providing all-inclusive, structured, high interest activities, as well as fostering connections among peers, parents, school staff, and the local community. In addition, it has been successful in increasing the academic achievement of its students during its three years of operation.

“Visions” successfully bridges social/emotional barriers by providing *all-inclusive* activities to students, thus making them less intimidating for students to participate in. Students are invited to sign up for a wide range of activities on an ongoing basis. There are few restrictions other than limits to certain programs due to the size of a group. However, programs are flexible and are extremely willing to accommodate students’ needs.

This is a structured program operating for three hours everyday after school for students in Grades Five to Seven. Students work on assigned schoolwork for the first hour, and then are provided a snack before being given a choice of which activity they want to participate in. High interest, non-school sanctioned sports such as karate and lacrosse are just two of...
the activities provided.

The six “Visions” staff members that oversee the day-to-day operations of the program have remained largely unchanged in the past three years. This core group of “Visions” staff is supplemented by school board staff who are financially compensated for their involvement in coaching and instructing a wide variety of activities. Such involvement of teachers and support staff helps create positive connections with students.

Students experience positive peer interaction throughout the course of the school year. Friendships are forged and students are keen and willing to be involved in a safe and positive environment with their friends while developing positive attitudes, relationships and skills. Program activities take place at the school site and in the local community. Not only does this on-site program eliminate transit and nutrition issues, it provides students with a strong connection to school and community.

Connections to the local community are further increased with the offering of programs such as karate. Karate is open to the local community and is instructed by a qualified black belt instructor. Furthermore, parents/guardians are invited to participate in such activities with their children, strengthening this most fundamental connection. In one example of a female student and her mother, the student was having difficulty meeting deadlines for her assignments, as well as completing them. A meeting was called between the teacher, mother, and student and an agreement was reached: assigned work must be completed and handed in on time or privileges for karate will be taken away. Since the meeting, the student is currently completing and handing in her assigned work on time.

**Academic Benefits**

Each year the BC provincial government administers standardized tests called the Foundation Skills Assessment, (FSA) to all BC students in grades four and seven. The test is intended to assess student abilities in reading comprehension, writing, and numeracy. Test scores from the past three years (2001-2003), the duration of the “Visions” program, show significant improvement. (Ministry of Education, 2003). The number of Grade Four’s at or above their grade level in reading comprehension increased from 22 to 44 to 73 per cent, in writing from 63 to 88 to 94 per cent, and in numeracy from 47 to 88 to 79 per cent. Similar findings were recorded for Grade Seven’s. Reading comprehension increased from 40 to 75 to 86 per cent, writing from 80 to 80 to 85 per cent, and numeracy skyrocketed from 36 to 80 to 100 per cent. This positive correlation between participation in extracurricular activities and increased academic achievement has been well documented (Camp, 1990; Marsh 1992). Specifically, research done by Gerber (1996) has linked higher standardized test scores to increased participation.
Importance and Implication—Building bridges

Our findings and the supporting research beg the question: How can we, as educators, help to build bridges across these barriers to encourage participation in school-based extracurricular activities for our First Nations students? More specifically, what changes must be made to the existing situation at the high school level to promote increased inclusion of First Nations students?

If we want to increase extracurricular participation of inner city First Nations students at the high school level to mirror that of the elementary school, we must first recognize what is working at the elementary school. Elementary school students in our investigation identified the “Visions” program as an integral part of their lives, providing positive, stable connections to the school, family, and community.

Critics of these all-inclusive policies have argued that a “focus on self-esteem has become an end in itself, not a means to—or a result of academic success” (Hill, 1999). These critics have gone on to suggest that a “feel good” concept denies students the ability to assess their efforts and accomplishments realistically” (Hill, 1999). Our investigation clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of such a program on increasing academic success as well as self-esteem at the elementary school level. As for assessing one’s efforts and accomplishments realistically, we argue that participation at all levels of competition can provide such realistic feedback. As famous sportscaster, Howard Cosell put it, “The ultimate victory in competition is derived from the inner satisfaction of knowing that you have done your best and that you have gotten the most out of what you had to give.”

One obvious barrier to implementing such a program is funding. After-school programs such as “Visions” require significant funding to pay for coaches and sponsors, as well as equipment, snacks, supplies, transit, and admission fees for field trips. As school boards have to deal with shrinking budgets due to government cutbacks, school administrators are looking beyond the school boards for ways to increase budgets. More and more schools are resorting to increased activity fees, athletic fees, installation of vending machines, and as in the case of “Visions,” corporate sponsorship.
Should BC public schools be forced to seek funding outside of existing school budgets to fund extracurricular activities for students? A report put together by the National Federation of State High School Associations (2002) entitled “The Case for High School Activities” concluded that extracurricular activities are “one of the best bargains around” for schools. The NFHS estimated that schools in the United States typically allocate only one to three percent of their total budgets to high school extracurricular programs. This funding goes to pay teachers’ extra-duty salaries, buy equipment, and provide transportation. Given that the Province of BC does not pay “extra-duty salaries” to teachers coaching or sponsoring extracurricular activities, their support of extracurricular activities is even more of a bargain.

Unfortunately in times of restraint, it is often the weakest and most vulnerable who suffer the most. In 2004, the BC provincial government eliminated targeted inner city funding previously allocated to support disadvantaged schools. This is the same government who recently put forth the Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreements (2003) recommending strategies for success including “development / participation in extracurricular activities” (16).

A direct result of this funding cut is the loss of seven full time teachers at the high school we studied—down from one hundred to ninety-three. The result will be higher workloads for teachers and support staff, which will likely lead to less willingness among staff. The probable consequences for our First Nations students is that there will be even less opportunities to become involved in the school community thus further decreasing their sense of belonging.

Unfortunately, next year (2004-05 school year) “Visions” will operate in its final year of corporate funding. The annual cost of operating the program is approximately $20,000 - $24,000. In addition, with $14,000 remaining in the grant, the program is anticipating an approximate $6,000 - $10,000 funding shortfall for the 2004-05 school year. As a result, “Visions” is facing an extremely difficult task in providing the same level of activities with less funding next year as well as an uncertain future. Despite the program’s proven success and the elementary school administrator’s active pursuit of new sponsorship, there has been no confirmation of funding as of yet.

**Conclusion**

It is easy to place the onus of responsibility on teachers to be more caring and encouraging toward First Nations students in order to increase their participation. However, the reality of our findings is that teachers already care a great deal and want to see the situation improved. Teachers also reported that with the existing workloads and the continual cutbacks to funding, they see themselves as overextended. If the schools, districts, and provincial government are serious about improving the dismal statistics for First Nations students, they must be willing to fund initiatives that seek to make improvements to the learning environment. Thus it is our recommendation that government and school boards work together to implement all-inclusive programs such as “Visions” at inner city high schools as a supplement to the existing competitive, exclusive high school sports programs. Until there is adequate funding for after-school programs, such as “Visions,” the majority of First Nations students will continue to encounter barriers to the benefits associated with extracurricular activities.
Thoughts and observations one year later.

A year after our original research was conducted, we have found that little has changed for the First Nations learners in our schools. Despite some changes and improvements within the schools and the district, First Nations students continue to experience significant barriers to participating in extra-curricular activities.

Teacher-researcher Brian Ee has witnessed a dramatic change in the situation for First Nations learners at his elementary school. Last year, our study revealed the successes of the corporate-funded after-school program in encouraging the participation of First Nations students in extra-curricular activities. While the after-school program remains successful in engaging Aboriginal students in extra-curricular activities, it has changed from being an administrator’s responsibility to a teacher’s responsibility. Disappointingly, this is one more case of the enormous responsibilities being shouldered by teachers as a result of lost funding.

For researchers Charity Sakakibara, (nee Bonneau) and Jason Lauzon, there have been some positive changes for the school’s First Nations students. Two of the students interviewed last year have become involved in extra-curricular activities. One Grade Nine girl joined the school swim team as well as participating in the school play. A Grade Eleven student joined the girls’ softball team and is enjoying it immensely. In addition, two new First Nations support workers have breathed new life and energy into the work with First Nations learners. These two workers have started a First Nations Club which meets weekly to offer valuable activities and speakers for our youth. This club encourages pride and a sense of belonging in the participating students. Despite these small successes at the high school, the overall statistics for academic achievement and extra-curricular participation of First Nations remain dismal. Currently, First Nations students are not participating in extra-curricular activities at the same rate as their peers nor have academic success rates increased. While the participation of First Nations students in extra-curricular activities remains high at the elementary school, as a result of the after-school program, the staff members have little support in their efforts to improve the situation for First Nations learners.

However, there is hope for our First Nations learners. The Vancouver district has recently signed an Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement (AEEA) with the local First Nations communities. This district-wide plan provides specific objectives to assist schools to improve the outcomes of First Nations learners. While the Aboriginal Strategic Plan does not explicitly address improving extracurricular participation, it does address the importance of encouraging a sense of belonging and community for First Nations learners. The plan includes strategies such as the inclusion of First Nations literature into the curriculum, as well as providing in-service for Aboriginal literacy for staff. The plan also includes strategies that would encourage the participation of First Nations parents in the PAC and literacy program. While the AEEA does not specifically address extra-curricular participation, it does promote inviting the community into the schools and fostering a sense of belonging for aboriginal students, which our study indicated was vital in encouraging the success of our First Nations learners. With the district’s new focus on Aboriginal learners, we remain hopeful that many positive changes are on the horizon for our First Nations learners.

Resources

Black, Susan. (2002, June). The Well Rounded Student: Extracurricular activities and


Dyson, Deborah S. (1983). Utilizing Available Resources at the Local Level. Fact Sheet. ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools Las Cruces, NM.


**About the Authors**

**Brian Ee** grew up on the eastside of Vancouver and now teaches there. Brian has taught at an inner-city elementary school with a large First Nations population for the past three years. He has coached volleyball, basketball, baseball, soccer, and track and field, and is currently the school’s Athletic Director. Brian is also the Vice President of VEPPA (Vancouver Elementary Physical Activity Association). In addition to being interested in playing every sport known to man (and woman), Brian also enjoys reading.

**Jason Lauzon** grew up in North Vancouver, but now lives and works in Vancouver. He began teaching at small elementary school annex but later moved into teaching special programs at a large inner-city high school in the eastside of Vancouver. Jason currently teaches a Grade 8 bridge program, inspiring reluctant learners. Jason is also the coach of the girls’ ice hockey team and is the teacher-sponsor for the school’s Recycling Club.

**Charity Sakakibara (nee Bonneau)** grew up on the Okanagan Indian Band Reserve just outside Vernon, British Columbia. For the past five years, she has worked with the First Nations students enrolled in a First Nations program at a large inner-city school in east Vancouver. Currently, Charity also teaches mainstream English classes as well as First Nations Studies 12. Charity coordinates and sponsors the school’s First Nations Homework Club.