

**SWOVA's "Peace Kids" Social and Emotional Learning Program:
Teachers' Feedback and Program Evaluation Report, 2015-16**

Background and Introduction

The SWOVA Community Development and Research Society (SWOVA for short) is a non-profit, community-based organization located in the southern Gulf Islands of British Columbia with an 18-year history of developing and delivering a variety of 'respectful relationship development' programs for youth in public schools both locally and provincially. It was established in response to public concern, especially on Salt Spring Island, about interpersonal violence and abuse in the rural communities of the islands.¹ A community survey conducted in 1997 established that the priority for action most widely supported by the public was programming for violence prevention and interpersonal respect in schools. This led over several years to the development of a four-year, 48-session program for students in grades 7, 8, 9 and 10, called "R+R" (Respectful Relationships).

In 2013-14, SWOVA responded to requests by teachers and parents to extend their work to younger children² by developing the curriculum for a 12-session anti-bullying program, intended for delivery over three years to children in grades 4, 5 and 6. This program, called "**Peace Kids**", focuses on social and emotional learning (SEL) to develop self-awareness, empathy for others and conflict resolution skills in pre-teens, thus setting the stage for further learning of respectful relationship skills in the higher grades through the R+R program.

The curriculum and facilitation strategy for **Peace Kids** was developed and first delivered as a pilot project in 2013-14 to approximately 200 grade 4, 5 and 6 students in six schools. Funding included a small allocation for independent evaluation of the classroom testing phase. This research showed strong support for the program by teachers³ and identified some directions for its improvement to strengthen future deliveries.

Funding was not secured for delivery in the subsequent year (2014-15), but it was found for the current 2015-16 school year, which is the focus of this program evaluation report.

Evaluation Design and Response

In the pilot testing year, the teachers of participating classes were asked to complete both pre-program and post-program surveys, which they found somewhat demanding (though perhaps understandable for a pilot). This year the evaluator asked for only a post-program assessment, which was made available online for greater convenience and a quicker response time, and limited to 17 questions in total.

¹ The five islands in the southern Gulf Islands group are linked (among other ways), by their inclusion in BC School District 64.

² Its flagship "Respectful Relationships" (R+R) program was designed for youth in grades 7, 8, 9 and 10.

³ Students of this age were considered too young to provide meaningful, reflective feedback data, and funding did not permit the development of other program-specific measurement tools.

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It is unclear exactly how many teachers and teaching assistants were exposed to the PK program as staffing was somewhat fluid for these special SWOVA-delivered sessions, but 12 of an estimated 15 completed the survey. This is the same number that responded in 2013-14.

As well, the program's two facilitators were interviewed (separately), following a written interview guide. They identified a need for more direct "outcome evaluation" data on the **Peace Kids** program's impact on students in the future (as did one of the teachers). If this idea is pursued by the agency, it would require additional funding and adequate time allocated for the design and testing of curriculum-specific measures appropriate for the age of targeted students.

Program Implementation

As per the program proposal, **Peace Kids** was delivered in 10 classes located in four schools, with an approximate enrolment of 250 students from grade 3 to grade 8, of which the majority was in grades 4 and 5. Seven of the responding teachers had not participated in the pilot year, and five had.

One positive change in the delivery plan for this year was that, as a result of teachers' assessments in 2013-14 and the evaluator's recommendation, mixed grade classes were kept together for the 2015-16 deliveries. This is considered a valuable modification because of the comfort level that pre-existing class groups are likely to have with one another, and because teachers can more easily build on the content of the PK program if all the students in a class have been exposed to the same core curriculum.

A sample of teachers' comments on the advantages of keeping their classes together, regardless of the grade level mix, follows below:

Our class is a family and Peace Kids explores some deep and meaningful relationships in a real and intimate way. It is only logical that the whole class be included.

Keeping the class together helps build community and a more respectful class.

The students [in an existing class] already have a sense of rapport and belonging, so the social context is less of an interruption to learning than when different classes are mixed together.

[The advantages were...] Better classroom management, greater comfort for the students being with their regular classmates.

The students are in with people who they [know and] trust and are more likely to feel safe sharing stories, ideas and opinions. As a teacher, I got to observe my own students and make notes on their social development. Also the students can discuss issues that affect them as a class and then it is easier to have a common language and agreements [for problem-solving] after.

In 2015-16, SWOVA as an agency set itself the goal of increasing and enhancing its cooperative relationships with teachers and schools. Accordingly, the **Peace Kids** survey included a question about teachers' satisfaction with this relationship. All the teachers but one rated it at 6 or 7 on a scale of 1 to 7, with 75% (9 teachers) rating it at 7. Only one teacher

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expressed some dissatisfaction, saying that “The facilitators should share with the teacher what the lesson plan is for the day or week.”⁴ Among the positive comments were:

The facilitators communicated well about what their needs were, and were very responsive and attentive to things I had to say.

Loved the presenters – [they were] professional and [had] excellent rapport with the students.

Both facilitators were excellent: compassionate, concerned about the students and knowledgeable about their subject.

I really appreciated how [the facilitators] met with me before the program to discuss the needs of my class....

The facilitators expressed themselves as very pleased with the collaborative relationships they had this year at the classroom and school levels. They were pleased with the teachers’ engagement in the classroom (a program objective), and with the appreciative verbal comments they made. However, they identified a need to continue working on relationships at the school district level. They also identified an objective to explore greater program participation by the schools in the smaller islands, and acknowledged the need to reactivate the Youth Team.

Teachers were asked whether there are benefits to having a program that focuses on social and emotional learning and non-violence delivered by community-based facilitators who specialize in this field. Eleven out of the twelve said yes, and listed some of the benefits as follows:

[They] can take kids out of their regular context which can bring them to new insights.

It certainly sends the message to students that our community cares about learning to relate to each other in healthy ways. [...] And it provides students and teachers with new perspectives and experiences they would not be exposed to otherwise. The fact that the facilitators come in specially for this program helps make it something special and memorable.

It is hard to find time in [teachers’] busy schedules to facilitate this sort of program – having an outside agency come in creates time for an important topic. It is also great to have the SWOVA facilitators as they know the topics so well and have so much experience. The kids really look up to them for this.

Having 2 adults [from outside the school] facilitate this type of program, presenting the importance of social “etiquette” amongst young people, gave my kids a chance to discuss and ask questions. The more they talk, the more they understand the importance of developing a positive and caring society.

One teacher replied that there were no particular benefits to having SWOVA’s facilitators deliver the program, commenting as follows:

⁴ It is also noted that in answer to a different question, three teachers said that **Peace Kids** had been “mandated,” which seemed to mean that administrators made the decision to have it delivered.

The benefit is that the program is delivered. It can be done by an outside agency or by school staff.

Teachers' SEL Goals and Program Satisfaction

"Social and Emotional Learning" is not a precise term or one with a single, agreed definition, but it has become popular as a way of referring to a broad strand of education that focuses on the life skills needed for (i) understanding and regulating the self and (ii) engaging with others in respectful ways. Many of the core ideas and objectives of SEL have been part of SWOVA's "R+R" (Respectful Relationships) program since its beginnings in 1997.

The term has been defined by the CASEL⁵ website as:

"...the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to (i) understand and manage emotions, (ii) set and achieve positive goals, (iii) feel and show empathy for others, (iv) establish and maintain positive relationships, and (v) make responsible decisions."⁶

The **Peace Kids** survey asked teachers two open-ended questions designed to probe their views about the social and emotional skills and competences their students most needed and teachers most wanted the **Peace Kids** facilitators to help them develop. Not surprisingly, teachers' views ranged widely over the possible terrain. Informal content analysis of their responses suggests that the majority of their objectives for their students can be classified under two headings which echo the SEL principles stated above:

- understanding and skill development in relation to the self (self awareness and self regulation), and
- understanding and skill development in relation to others (empathy, respect and connection).

When asked a general question about how satisfied they were that the **Peace Kids** program this year met their learning objectives for their students, using a scale of 1—7, nine of the twelve teachers (75%) rated their satisfaction at either 6 or 7. One teacher rated it at 5, and two rated it at 3 on the scale. They were not asked to explain their scores.

In future, it would be a useful measure for the evaluator to ask how much class time teachers think is appropriate or needed for **Peace Kids** to make meaningful progress toward agreed program goals.

⁵ CASEL is the acronym for Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, an American organization which is one of the leading proponents of SEL in schools.

⁶ <http://www.casel.org/social-and-emotional-learning/> Note that there are other lists of core SEL competencies, some of them much longer than this one. The evaluator is not aware of and lists that include the concept of 'peace'.

Teachers' Views of Program Effectiveness

The teachers' survey included some more specific questions about the PK program's perceived effectiveness, based on their observation. The first asked them to list up to three program elements that they thought were especially effective or valuable for their students. Most of those they listed fit clearly under the SEL umbrella. For example:

#1 for me was the discussion of agreements for being together; #2 was the discussion of what peaceful and not peaceful mean.

#1. The amount of discussion and students being more engaged in solving their communication problems. #2. For the students to understand the terms 'emotional intelligence' and 'expression of gratitude'. #3. For the students to be able to give examples of both concepts.

Perhaps the facilitated discussion on competition and cooperation was the most impressive, and it was valuable for the [teachers] to witness. Two fairly verbal students had quite different ideas on the value of competition and they could easily have found themselves arguing over their different opinions but [facilitator] helped them to share their perspectives, with the main perspective being on listening and on appreciative curiosity. [The facilitators] also explained, with examples, how it can be very useful for people to be able to recognize different emotions they may be experiencing and to share their emotions. I think students could see how this ability to check in with themselves and with others could empower them to deal with their emotions in ways that are empowering.

Another of these questions focused in on the fundamental idea of "peace", asking if the teachers thought their students had a clearer idea of what peace is, as a result of the PK program, and why it is an important goal in people's lives and in society more broadly. Teachers were divided on this. Of the 10 who answered, six said 'yes', three said 'maybe' and one said 'no'. Their explanatory remarks raise questions worth considering and also demonstrate that the program does not present exactly the same curriculum to all class groups for situational reasons such as students' age and maturity, and that not all teachers were present for all of the program time.

All the students had a chance to witness and participate in thoughtful discussions. Part of that was the opportunity to think about what peace means to them and to try out some skills.

I think the word peace is an intangible idea to the students so it is hard for them to understand what peace could be for them. (...) I couldn't help but feel like [they] treated it as a fake thing when it was brought up.

The program asked some big questions about peace that caused us all to think and discuss on a deep level.

The effectiveness of the **Peace Kids** program, as assessed by the teachers, was measured more directly with the following two questions. They were asked if they were going to adopt or adapt any of elements of the program for on-going use in their

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classrooms. Of the 11 who replied, 7 said 'yes', 2 said 'no' and 2 said 'maybe'. Several had already done so.

After the peace kids program we followed up with a peace skills project where students identified what the peace qualities of caring, fairness, trustworthiness and citizenship look like.

Yes, by reminding myself and others to focus on breathing and gratitude. (...) Encouraging myself and others to "check in", being genuinely curious about how we are feeling and what circumstances might be provoking certain feelings.

Yes. I often try to incorporate time for students to meet in the program's circle format and spend time listening to each other in a respectful way. I also integrate peaceful relationships into the training of our Grade 5 Firebirds as they are the role models of the school.

Yes – agreements for being together.

I already use things I have learned in the Peace Kids program: check-ins, meaningful discussion and listening from the heart, etc.

Teachers were also asked a reverse question as to whether they would suggest that any parts of the PK program be dropped or significantly modified. Two teachers said "yes", offering the following perspectives on the need for change.

The vocabulary used by the presenters is above the comprehension level of the students.

Only a couple of pages of the handbook were used and very few of the students chose to keep theirs. It might be less wasteful just to hand out sheets (...). I thought having the students go outside to think about things in nature that they particularly appreciate was a great idea – they need to move around more and have more chances to connect with nature. Many hung out with friends (...), but the emphasis on gratitude (and its benefits) was great.

I'm not sure the tarp activity really provided much more than a chance to horse around. Luckily this group stayed pretty much "on task" but I can imagine other groups would have 'lost it' after a short while.

Having kids practice cooperation in small groups or pairs, such as trying being blind and guided by a partner, or a puzzle activity I know of, where one partner needs to be able to direct another one to do a puzzle, might have been useful. It was good for them to have some experience cooperating as a whole group, but that is actually really hard to have any success at. Groups of 10 - 12 are about the maximum number, I think, where groups can be expected to be able to cooperate well, in terms of discussions, usually. This group did quite well, but it was still kind of frustrating for some, I think, because they were faced with the choice of not getting a turn to speak, or being more assertive, perhaps at the expense of other people getting a turn (or having the discussion fall apart, as could so easily have happened).

Another measure of program effectiveness, and of support for SWOVA to extend this program, was a question that asked how interested the teachers would be in attending a professional development workshop if SWOVA were to develop one and offer it in conjunction with the **Peace Kids** program. Using a scale of 1—7, their responses were positive, with eight of the teachers (66.7%) indicating that they were somewhat or very interested, two teachers were unsure, and two teachers were not interested.⁷

Facilitators' Goals and Perceptions of Program Effectiveness

In their interviews, the facilitators talked at some length about their goals. Both spoke about the value of introducing key concepts and processes of SEL at an early age, which they saw as important for the children in their present lives and also as the foundation for more in-depth work in later grades through the R+R program.

They listed goals they had for the learning of skills such as reflective listening, self-reflection and self-regulation, the identification of feelings/emotions and the part they play in their own behaviour and that of others, empathy for others and the expression of gratitude and appreciation as part of positive relationships. They provided a number of examples of successful learning, and noted that teachers reported relevant gains by their students as well. The successes reported by the facilitators included:

- In most classrooms, they heard a wide range of emotions identified, explored and consciously expressed by students;
- They heard many examples of critical thinking in relation to the impact of emotions on behaviour and communication, often by sharing life stories as examples;
- They saw many demonstrations of respectful listening, with resulting gains in students' understanding of one another;
- They felt that using a discussion of 'what is peace' and 'what is violence' as the framework to address bullying gave students new insight into this core problem;
- Also in relation to bullying, they saw examples of critical thinking applied to the behaviour of the bully, the victim and the by-standers, and to strategies for intervention or getting help.

The facilitators noted that, as pre-adolescents, the **Peace Kids** students were in many cases *more* open to the exploration of the ideas presented in the program and engaged with them *more* boldly, bravely and non-judgmentally than older students. They also agreed that **Peace Kids** has a great deal of potential as part of a suite of SEL initiatives in the school district, and hope to be able to continue to develop it in coming years.

Recommendations

The evaluation report of the 2013-14 pilot version of the **Peace Kids** program included 8 substantial recommendations. Some have been achieved in whole or in part in this year's delivery, and some remain to be achieved, frequently because of limited funding. The

⁷ Some additional comments offered by teachers appear in Appendix I.

recommendations from the pilot year will serve as the starting point for this year's evaluative comments.

1. *“Recommendation to keep split classes together as normally constituted for **Peace Kids** delivery.”* This recommendation from 2013-14 was implemented in the current year, was appreciated by teachers, and was found entirely workable by facilitators.
2. *“Recommendation that facilitators and teachers work together more closely to adapt the **Peace Kids** program to the needs of specific classes and the priorities of their teachers.”* It is clear that progress toward achieving this recommendation has been made since 2013-14, with considerable satisfaction expressed by both teachers and facilitators about their working relationships this year. And yet, statements of goals differed somewhat between the two sets of professionals. The PK program, which is designed for delivery annually over three years (roughly, in grades 4, 5 and 6) is flexible, and the facilitators have used a combination of discussion with teachers and their own best judgment to “meet the students where they were at” in their sessions, as one of the facilitators expressed it. Given the time pressures that both teachers and facilitators are under in their separate jobs, it is perhaps unrealistic to imagine that they could review the curriculum together before delivery, to identify at least a small number of priorities for key learning, and then invite the evaluator to help them assess their success in meeting them. It is nevertheless a recommendation worth considering.
3. *“Recommendation that SWOVA consider developing a proposal that School District 64 adopt the full **Peace Kids** program, in its cumulative form, as part of its curriculum for a three-year trial period.”*⁸ This would require considerable discussion as well as long-term funding from outside the District, two big challenges, but it would enable the program to be delivered as designed—building foundations for progressive social and emotional learning over three years—and to provide continuity and reinforcement for the introductory learning that is begun in any one year.⁹ A three-year curriculum is already in hand, although it would undoubtedly need review and revision based on the two years of delivery that have put it to the test of the classroom.
4. *“Recommendation to identify and prioritize core concepts.”* This applies particularly to the one-year delivery situation, and ideally should be operationalized in conjunction with recommendation #2. That said, picking and choosing from a rich curriculum source (such as the existing three-year curriculum) to decide on particular lesson plans for particular classes is a common educational strategy, and has a lot to recommend it in terms of “meeting the students where they are at”. However, such individualized design makes it hard to assess results. If results-oriented program evaluation is considered important, then a short list of core concepts and skills is required so that appropriate measures can be designed. (See #5, below.)

⁸ This is a modification of the 2013-14 recommendation, necessitated by changed circumstances.

⁹ Note that BC schools are undergoing major reorganization of curricula and delivery methods, which would have to be reviewed as part of considering this recommendation.

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5. *“Recommendation to evaluate central program goals with the addition of data from students.”* The evaluation of **Peace Kids** that has taken place so far has been limited to observational data provided by teachers and facilitators, an informative but indirect form of program assessment. It would be a valuable extension of this work to develop and apply evaluation tools appropriate for use with the children themselves. Given their age and the nature of the PK program, this would require sufficient funding for a researcher to review the SEL evaluation field and design tools appropriate for the PK program. The resulting ability to provide evidence of program impact would be a contribution not just to the work being done by SWOVA and the schools in SD64, but more broadly to the assessment of SEL in BC and the rest of Canada.
6. *“Recommendation for curriculum review.”* In the Program Assessment Report for 2013-14, it was suggested that an external curriculum review (something that SWOVA’s programs have benefitted from in the past) would be of value as part of the normal course of professional curriculum development. This recommendation still stands, but should be paired with a review carried out by SWOVA’s facilitators (including input from teachers if possible), who now have the benefit of two years of classroom delivery.
7. *“Recommendation to consider adding a ‘professional development’ opportunity for teachers in conjunction with the PK program.”* It seems likely that there are a considerable number of teachers who are interested in SEL, particularly at the elementary and middle school levels, and may want to learn more about it. SWOVA could consider sharing its own expertise in the form of a professional development session, planned and arranged with the school district. Two-thirds of the teachers whose classes experienced the program this year expressed an interest in such a session. It might be particularly interesting to local teachers if another teacher (or a teacher with experience from another district) could be involved in the presentation.
8. *“Recommendation to explore possibilities for additional funding.”* School Boards and community-based organizations such as SWOVA both face a seriously constrained funding climate. It is nevertheless the case that if the **Peace Kids** program is to survive and grow, with an on-going application of ‘lessons learned’ to enhance its effectiveness, additional sources of funding will need to be found. In this regard, SWOVA faces the challenges imposed on most non-governmental organizations in the absence of the ‘core funding’ needed to retain staff, stabilize existing programs and partnerships, and extend them. It can be assumed that they are ever-vigilant in their search for sources of funding, but unless government policies change or other opportunities present themselves, those are likely to be program-specific. For **Peace Kids**, it would be advantageous to have additional funds for program growth, curriculum development, and more sophisticated evaluation.

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Appendix I

Eight of the 12 teachers made “final comments” of their own choosing in answer to an open-ended question, as follows:

Thank you for this follow up!

The program needs to be changed in order to have the students "buy in" to the meaning and why it is important to have peace in their lives. However, most do not and they are dealing with many issues in their personal lives. The program would be enhanced by having a teacher/counsellor work in conjunction with the program to develop lesson plans and vocabulary that is appropriate for the students.

I felt the program I observed (and participated in as I could) over the 4 days it was given was excellent. The students were highly engaged, having the opportunity for quiet, thoughtful or meditative activities as well as physically active times and their ideas were heard respectfully and clearly appreciated and valued. The facilitators were very skilled at guiding class discussions and circle sharing. And although the content was aimed at middle school age levels, I learned things too. Simply offering this program shows students and everyone who knows about it that our community cares about healthy human interaction and values students' contributions towards that.

I think it is really important to have the SWOVA facilitators come into the class. It would be interesting to see if they have ideas about how to extend it in class beyond the program.

Thank you.

I really appreciate how [the facilitators] met with me before the program to discuss the needs of my class. I really appreciate how the class was kept together. I appreciate how there was a place for humour in the circle and how kids were given time to share their thoughts and stories.

Thanks for all you do for the students in our school district. You offer a valuable and wonderful program and I look forward to working with you again soon.

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