

Alexandria Park Community School: sport as a vehicle for positive social cohesion

Project lead: Kellie Ellis and William McAndrew, UTS Sport and Exercise Science

External partners: Alexandria Park Community School

1. Summary of impact

A tailored school sports program led by UTS Sport and Exercise students has transformed physical and social outcomes at an inner-city Sydney school. Targeting Year 8 students at Alexandria Park Community School (APCS), the program was designed to build students' physical capacity and enhance their social connectedness. It also doubled as a professional placement opportunity for students in the final year of the Bachelor of Sport and Exercise Science.

APCS students benefitted from access to a tailored program that increased their physical capabilities and taught them to work together and communicate more clearly, positively and respectfully with one another and their teachers. The UTS students enhanced their communication and coaching capabilities, gaining real-world experience with the prescription and delivery of exercise science interventions and learning to use sport and games to drive positive communication and achieve team outcomes.

2. The problem

APCS is a K–12 government school in the inner-Sydney suburb of Alexandria. The school's teaching executive and Aboriginal Education assistant had identified that Year 8 students needed support to navigate more positive social interactions in and out of the classroom. Cultural and socio-economic diversity and wide-ranging differences in

academic ability, which were further amplified by the school's selective stream, were identified as barriers to social cohesion. Through an existing relationship with APCS, final-year Bachelor of Sport and Exercise Science Students co-designed and led a physical activity program to foster interpersonal relationships within the Year 8 cohort and deliver positive impacts to their health and wellbeing.

3. Beneficiaries

The physical activity program delivered a wealth of physical, social and emotional wellbeing benefits to the Year 8 students, which also resulted in positive flow-on effects to the wider APCS community. The school itself gained additional support from UTS to deliver its sports program at a time when the education sector was struggling with staffing issues in the aftermath of COVID-19. The initiative also created significant professional and learning opportunities for the five UTS students who participated in the APCS placement.

4. Approach to impact

The APCS partnership took the form of a professional placement for final-year students in the UTS Sport and Exercise Science program. Under the supervision of Associate Lecturer Kellie Ellis and Clinic Coordinator William McAndrew in the School of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation, the five UTS students co-designed a weekly, two-hour sport and physical activity program in partnership with the APCS sport coordinator.

The resulting 2 x 10-week (school terms 3 and 4 2022) program was focused on netball (five weeks) and ultimate frisbee (five weeks) and was delivered in two, one-hour blocks each week. The first block focused on warm-up activities, including speed, agility and mobility drills; plyometric exercises; and benchmarking of students' progress via evidence-based exercise testing, while the second block focused on gameplay.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

APCS has seen firsthand how evidenced-based sports programs can deliver not just physical fitness outcomes but social impacts as well. At the beginning of the program, many of the ACPS students refused to participate in program activities; however, as

the weeks passed and the UTS team continued to refine the offering in response to student needs and preferences, engagement with the program increased. Taking part in a team sport increased opportunities for social interaction between APCS students who otherwise did not spend time together, with some students choosing to mentor others as part of the teamwork experience.

The UTS-APCS program has resulted in a partnership between the two institutions and has also created significant potential for new school-based professional placements for final-year UTS Sport and Exercise Science students, who need to complete 140 hours of practical learning as a requirement of their degree. Based on the success of this initiative, APCS has invited UTS back to continue the work. The UTS team is currently looking for further opportunities to partner on school sport programs with both primary and high schools in Sydney.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

The project was partially funded by a UTS Social Impact Grant, with additional funding from the UTS Graduate School of Health. From a practical standpoint, an existing relationship between UTS Sport and Exercise Science and APCS was the launching pad for this program of work. UTS Exercise Science supervisor William McAndrew also provided guidance and mentoring for the UTS students who completed the APCS placement.

7. Challenges

Like many public schools in Sydney, APCS faces staffing issues, including high numbers of contract and casual staff and challenges associated with staff burnout in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. These outcomes had flow-on effects for the sport program, resulting in a lack of APCS staffing continuity. APCS student engagement and social cohesion also posed a significant challenge in the early stages of the program; however, these issues were mitigated by APCS support staff and by the development of trust between the APCS and UTS students. Finally, wet weather was an ongoing issue for the program, which was designed to be delivered outdoors. On rainy days, the UTS team revised the program for a smaller, indoor environment.