Case study of the PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM

at

Belgian Gardens State School

completed as part of the

Values Education Good Practice Schools Project (2005)

“You learn about responsibility and if you care about other people…
and if you should treat people the way you want to be treated”

(Year 3 student interview)
School Background and context

Belgian Gardens State School is situated in one of Townsville’s oldest established areas, immediately adjacent to some of the city’s most prestigious and affluent suburbs. The school has a history spanning nearly 120 years. Current enrolment is slightly more than 556 students (slightly above its ‘capped’ enrolment target of 540), with a staff of 22 FTE classroom teachers, supplemented by visiting specialists in a wide range of areas curriculum, and learning and behavioural support. The school population includes students from a wide range of national backgrounds, but majority born in Australia; around 4.9% of the students are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders. The school is characterised by a stable student and staff population; the current Principal was appointed to the school in 1993.

The school motto reflects the work ethic, one of the core values underpinning state schooling since its inception: “work for success”. The school’s planning overview states that:

The Mission of Belgian Gardens State School is to ensure meaningful learning and to develop thinking processes in an atmosphere which fosters encouragement, challenge, commitment and respect…

With the exception of ICT in the curriculum and the related issue of computing resources, the School Opinion Survey data across students, parents and teachers all indicate a school that is doing well in terms of both teaching and learning, and the range of factors associated with school climate, in comparison with both like schools and State schools as a whole. There is, however, a noticeable decline in scores on students’ sense of the school climate over the period 2002-2004, in particular in 2003, with a sense of being treated fairly, and student behaviour the major contributors.

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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Mean scores</th>
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<td>2002</td>
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<td>2003</td>
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Table 1: Student responses: School climate (overall)
In less quantifiable terms, the Principal expressed concern that the dramatic growth in school enrolments had made it more difficult to maintain a sense of ‘family’ in the school over recent years, a view echoed by a number of staff interviewed.

I return to this data in discussing the possible future of the Peer Support Program in the school.

A Note on Data Collection

This case study of the Peer Support program at Belgian Gardens draws on a range of data to describe the program and its place in the school’s overall program, and to evaluate its impact. A range of school documents were provided for review including:

- The School Information Booklet
- School Planning overview
- Supportive School environment Programme
- Two sample school newsletters.

Evidence was also provided from the Behaviour Management Register. Interviews were conducted with the Principal, Deputy Principal and 6 of the 22 (FTE) classroom teachers, including the Peer Support program coordinating teacher. Five student focus group interviews were conducted, with 4-5 students in each, and drawing on students from years 1-7.

Peer support program-overview

Introduction, development and organisation of the program

The Peer Support program was introduced in 2004 on the initiative of one of the Year 7 teachers appointed the previous year; she had experienced the program and been impressed by its impact at the school from which she had transferred. The program began with one Year 7 class, the Year 1 cohort, and selected Year 4 and 6 classes. Participation was voluntary, and teachers were recruited by word of mouth.
Those teachers who were involved in that first year and who were interviewed appear to have had been aware of the program at least for a brief time before it was introduced, either through informal conversations with the teacher who became the coordinator, or through a previous Deputy Principal who was a staunch advocate of the program. The possible introduction of the program was discussed at a staff meeting, and a decision to allow it to be introduced on a small scale voluntary basis was taken following opposition from some staff. Opposition at least appears to have been based, at least in part on a sense that the curriculum was already overcrowded, and that this program would intrude further into quality teaching, and perhaps partly from a sense that the school’s track record over a long period was sufficiently successful that such a change was unnecessary and unwarranted. (It is important to note that I was unable to check such reasons with non-participating teachers, as they were not among those who volunteered to be interviewed.)

The introduction of the program in this manner meant that it departed from the standard procedure and mode of implementation specified in the Peer Support Foundations guidelines.

In 2005, the program continued on a part-school voluntary basis; recruitment was by response to a flier circulated by the coordinating teacher. The number of classes participating increased substantially to around \( \frac{2}{3} \) of the school; several of those interviewed suggested that this increase reflected recognition on the part of many who had not participated in the first year, that the program had demonstrated its value in the improved behaviour of many of the children involved, and a perceived improvement in the ‘tone’ of playground relations.

The decision to implement the Peer Support Program on a voluntary basis, rather than as a part of a whole school policy appears to be reflected in the program’s relative invisibility in school documents. In school newsletters, for example, it appears only as one item among many in the ‘what’s happening’ column; it does not appear as part of curriculum planning, in strategies for identifying and supporting disengaged students or for dealing with bullying, in the school’s Annual Report and Operational Plan, and it is invisible in the school budget. Equally, it does not appear under the headings of
Behaviour Management, Curriculum or Extra Curricular Activities listed in the Supportive School Environment Programme. These are all places where it might appear, if the school adopted it as a high profile part of its program.

The program is organised and promoted by a designated coordinator (Year 7 teacher). Initially, the coordinating teacher undertook most of the preparation of materials herself; her colleagues reported that for much of the first year, she bore a considerable part of the cost of materials personally. Subsequently, copying was funded from the Cluster’s Behaviour Management budget, and the work of copying delegated, to the Deputy Principal. Further, the school has covered costs to enable attendance by some staff, including the coordinating teacher, to participate in a variety of Peer Support related activities, from its TRS budget. However, the coordinating teacher does not receive any additional non-contact time or teacher aide support to coordinate the program.

The program is allocated one designated half hour lesson per week for all students in participating classes. Year 7 students (‘Peer Leaders’) lead this half hour session, following a preparation session with their teacher. Part of the program requires the students to prepare the specific materials for the lesson themselves but the preparation is both supported and monitored by the two participating Year 7 teachers. The ‘Peer Leaders’ work with a group of students from all year levels. Leaders are debriefed by the two participating Year 7 teachers after the lunch break following the weekly sessions.

In 2004 the Year 7 students were prepared for their peer leader role by a 2-day camp workshop held at the nearby PCYC; costs were minimised by arranging for parents to drop their children at the PCYC hall and collect them at the end of the day, and by asking children to bring their own lunches. Activities were led by the Year 7 teacher, and included a range of activities to prepare students for their leadership role, including challenging self-awareness and group facilitation activities.

Each participating classroom teacher supervises two Peer Support groups during the allocated half hour, supporting the Peer Leader as necessary. In addition, teachers ensure the timely arrival of students to the Peer Support lesson. Most teachers interviewed reported that they briefly debrief their students following PS sessions, stressing in
particular the values and key ideas the session was intended to teach. Several indicated that they drew either on the specific vocabulary, or the general ideas developed in Peer Support in discussing behavioural issues as they arose in the normal course of classroom teaching and learning.

Information about the program is presented from time to time by the coordinator, and discussion is sometimes raised by other staff, in staff meetings. Information for teachers concerning each week’s session is provided by the coordinating teacher. Feedback to the coordinating teacher appears to be communicated informally, principally by word of mouth. To date, only three of the 22 FTE classroom teachers in the school have received any training directly related to the Peer Support program.

Those interviewed discussed several issues involved in this approach. On the one hand, they suggested that it meant that the program was only operated by teachers strongly committed to its success. A consequence of this, they pointed out was that for those students who were involved, it was run with real commitment, and the program avoided the risk of being implemented half-heartedly by teachers not fully convinced of its value, or opposed to its introduction. On the other hand, they identified a number of disadvantages:

- competition for time and space with other ‘regular’ or ‘core’ activities;
- considerable strain on the organising teacher in organising the program without allocated funds and dedicated teacher aide time;
- the potential for developing a common language for dealing with social relations and the values underpinning them, across the school and across students’ career in the school, was lost;
- parents remained relatively ignorant of the program and its value, and consequently, tended to see it as a waste of time -- ‘playing games when they should be learning’, as one put it. (This seems especially likely where, as some of the younger students recounted, children talk at home about Peer Support largely in terms of the activities and games.)
Those involved in the program expressed unambiguous hopes that the program would expand and be adopted as a whole-school program. The Principal affirmed the value of the program, and articulated a vision of the future of the school in which Peer Support operated across the whole school on the basis of total consensus among all teaching staff and was more thoroughly integrated into the school’s behaviour management strategy, curriculum and promotion within the community at large. The Deputy Principal supported this, and included such concrete steps as a long term progressive plan for enabling all staff to participate in formal Peer Support Program training.

**Perceptions of the value of the program**

**Peer Support Program and Behaviour Management.**

Teachers interviewed clearly saw the Peer Support program as a crucial part of the school’s behaviour management program, and expressed the view that it had been introduced primarily as a contribution to behaviour management in a context where behaviour management problems were considered to be increasing. At the same time, they conceptualised behaviour management in broad terms of the development of positive relations among students and staff across the school.

Their view of behaviour management and of the potential of the program to contribute to behaviour management reflects the school context and fits well with the school’s behaviour management strategy. The school’s *Supportive School Environment Programme* describes the school’s approach to behaviour management as ‘positive, pro-active, inclusive and constructive… fostering a culture of encouragement and appreciation’. Staff are asked to model and affirm tolerance inclusion and encouragement. The school has a long-standing whole-school Supportive Behaviour Management Plan in place, featuring a positive approach to encouraging and supporting good behaviour and attitudes, a series of steps defining severity of behavioural problems, with well-defined responses, including a buddy system by which teachers could send students for time out in their buddy teacher’s classroom. Other initiatives to promote a pro-active student centred approach to behaviour management including entries on the front page of the weekly school newsletter recognising student helpfulness and...
achievement: the ‘caught in the act’ awards for doing ‘something special, kind or helpful in the playground’ are the first item in those newsletters. The school’s *Code of Behaviour*, which is displayed in a variety of locations around the school in different versions adapted to the understandings of older and younger students respectively, stresses among other issues or values, honesty, trust, responsibility, individual dignity and worth, self awareness, independence and confidence.

In keeping with this sense of complementarity between Peer Support and other aspects of the school Behaviour Management strategy, some of the teachers interviewed noted the overlapping of key ideas and even some terminology between Peer Support Program and their ‘normal’ ways of dealing with students’ problem behaviour, and saw potential for extending that overlap through the more systematic development, through Peer Support, of a common language for discussing social relations and behaviour, throughout the school.

As an extension of the Behaviour Management plan and Supportive School Environment strategy, Peer Support was seen as offering a way of promoting improved relationship throughout the school, but in particular among younger and older students, by establishing personal contacts and relationships in groups and, consequently facilitating mixing beyond the Peer Group session and in particular, in the playground.

**Peer Support Program, Leadership and Personal Development**

Some of the teachers interviewed, including the organising teacher, also represented the program as an important means of fostering leadership, responsibility and personal development.

In this regard, as with Behaviour Management, the program appears to complement and has potential to enhance parts of the school’s existing program. The school has a long standing practice of recognising Year 7 students’ seniority and potential special role in the school in the form of the award of a ‘Senior Leader’ badges. This continues alongside the Peer Leader program; thus, while not all Year 7 students are peer leaders, or participate in the program, all Leaders, as Year 7 students are also designated Senior
Leaders. Teachers explained to me that until 2004 all Year 7 students were awarded the badge, so that ‘senior leader’ was synonymous with ‘Year 7 student’. The badge and the status it conferred were not associated with any specific responsibilities, obligations or privileges. Alongside the introduction of the Peer Leader program, but not directly associated with it, the award of the badge was made no longer a matter of course. It is now dependent on students’ displaying leadership qualities and entering into a leadership contract.

The perceived role of Peer Support in promoting and cultivating student leadership within the school also fits well with the Supportive School Environment Programme which stresses the school’s commitment to the facilitation of students’ social development, as well as other qualities publicly endorsed by the school, such as quality of social relationships, reflection, problem solving and participation (Information Booklet, p. 1), leadership, responsibility, harmonious relationships and a positive, pleasant and cooperative tone within the school community (Information Booklet, p. 3).

Peer Support Program and Curriculum

Some teachers interviewed also talked about the program in curricular terms, although none named it explicitly as part of the curriculum. In particular, they saw links between the Peer Support Program and two of the KLAs: HRE, with its focus on personal development, and SOSE, with its study of social relations and social difference, and its values of inclusiveness and peaceful resolution of differences. Moreover, some indicated that they followed up Peer Group sessions in their classroom, and explained how they ask students what they have done and learned, and briefly clarify, focus and reinforce the key content – the ideas and concepts – around which the sessions are built.

Peer Support Program and the National Values Framework

All staff interviewed were aware of the National Values Framework. These values were made visible at various points throughout the school, including the staff room, in the form of the official National Values Framework poster. From the data collected, the implementation of Peer Support program at Belgian Gardens School explicitly supports
the development of the following values enunciated in the National Framework: care and compassion; respect; responsibility; understanding, tolerance and inclusion. The remaining five values could all be argued to be implicit in the Peer Support program and process. As with other aspects of the Peer Support Program, the teaching of values complements the broader school program, in that these values are embedded in a range of other aspects of the school’s approach to behaviour management and in the KLA curriculum structure, in particular, HRE and SOSE.

I return to the issue of the significance of the Peer Support program as a vehicle for teaching these values in my discussion of the impact of the program (below, p. ). Here, however, I note the importance of the fact that the Peer Support process does not simply talk about these values; rather, through both the leadership training, the adoption of inclusive and cooperative group strategies and the explicit and self conscious modelling of values by peers as well as authority figures such as teachers, the Peer Support program embeds the values in students’ practice and behaviour.

**Peer support program–impact so far**

**Quantitative data**

It is difficult to secure quantitative measures of the program’s impact on the School because it is not yet solidly embedded in the school’s program and culture. There appear to be three principal elements in this:

1. the program has only been taken up across parts of the school,
2. the program has only been operating for two years, and
3. the program does not yet enjoy a high profile in the school or high visibility in the school’s presentation of itself to its community.

Thus, for instance, parent School Opinion Survey responses are unlikely to register the impact of Peer Support on school climate factors if only some children are involved, if it is perceived as an ‘optional extra’ and if they are not aware of it as a core part of the school’s strategy for making Belgian Gardens a safe, secure, supportive place for children. Equally, it will not register in parents’ or students’ responses to curricular and
pedagogic questions in the School Opinion Survey data if parents do not have a clear idea of its contribution to their children’s learning.

Despite the factors that must limit the program’s impact, there are some signs that it is making a difference to patterns of misbehaviour in the school. The Behaviour Management Register, in particular, indicate that while suspensions have been low over several years and there is no noticeable drop in number of suspensions over 2004-2005, the number of infringements that have been serious enough to refer to the Deputy Principal, but not sufficiently serious to warrant suspension has dropped markedly – by around 40% over the past two years. Further, among such infringements, the number related to physical violence or bullying has dropped most sharply; for 2005, the record reveals that approximately one-third are physical, with the majority related to verbal misdemeanours and mild disobedience.

While it is, of course, not possible to isolate the impact of the Peer Support on this shift, both the Principal and the Deputy Principal concurred that there were no other identifiable changes in the school that were likely to have contributed to this change.

**Qualitative data**

Interview data revealed wide-spread and generally strong support for the program from staff and students alike. Importantly, students of all years reported that they enjoyed many of the activities in the Peer Support game (although some qualified this, as I note below), that they felt it contributed to improved relationships across the age range and that it enhanced their sense of wellbeing in the school. Interview data also pointed to some intersections between curriculum and the Peer Support program, but these were minimal. Students interviewed provided some evidence of increased self understanding and of personal growth in confidence, competence, self-knowledge and responsibility.

Several themes emerged in the interview data, principally around outcomes of the program, but some concerned with difficulties. While most of these themes were interrelated and interwoven, they are separated below for the purposes of analysis and understanding of the program in the context of Belgian Gardens school.
**Relationships**

The theme that surfaced most often (24 times) in the interviews concerned relationships.

Some teachers commented that they had noticed an increase in the numbers of students talking to students of different ages in the playground. Some also stated that they had experienced an increase in informal exchanges, initiated by students with whom they had no formal relations, either through class membership or Peer Group supervision. Sometimes this might be no more than a greeting ‘in passing’ but one teacher added that sometimes ‘in taking responsibility for wellbeing in the playground they might come to me for support’.

They also noticed more mixing of ages – ‘less segregation’, as one put it. They supported their claims with stories of incidents they had observed. Such interactions often involved Peer Leaders with children in Years 1 and 2, but one teacher related an incident in which a group of Year 5 students were looking after little one. Students, especially Peer Leaders, were at pains not to overstate the extent of such mixing. They commented that there was some mixing and discussion after Peer Group sessions, but added that for the most part play continued to be informally constructed among age-based friendship groups, explaining that it was ‘uncool’ to have ‘little kids hanging around you too much’. Nevertheless, several of them related stories of more incidental exchanges with younger children. They observed that often, now, when smaller children suffer minor scrapes in the playground they approach them, because ‘younger kids find older kids more approachable than teachers… they’re not as big, not as scary’.

Teachers and older students suggested that this expansion of cross age interactions had a significant impact on younger students’ confidence, through a reduction of fear, especially of bullying. One student commented that ‘they don’t have to be frightened of bigger children’. A teacher traced this back to Peer Support sessions, where ‘Year 1s fit in, join in… they’re not frightened to speak up’. Another suggested that there had been a ‘remarkable change’ in age interaction that had ‘helped ease transitions from year 1 to 2’.
Older students’ comments appeared to indicate that the greater interaction had enhanced their recognition and appreciation of younger students. Commenting on younger students’ contribution to Peer Support group discussion, for example, one leader said that ‘they come up with a lot of really good ideas that I would never have thought of.’

Finally, comments by both student leaders and teachers indicate that the program has resulted in enhances respect for teachers, and quality of relations with teachers, as Peer Leaders have gained a better and more sympathetic understanding of the difficulties teachers face in dealing with their misbehaviour.

**Personal Growth**

The second most frequently mentioned perceived outcome of the program was personal growth of students (20 times). Among teachers, this arose more in relation to older students than younger ones; one commented that:

‘with older kids it’s more personal growth. With the younger ones it more learning about things outside themselves. But for the older ones it’s more learning about themselves’.

In part, personal growth is seen to take the form of developing an applied knowledge of self management: For the senior students, teachers saw developments in

‘responsibility and preparation... there are problems when kids aren’t organised... Some are always very well prepared, but others [aren’t]... But even for them it’s good learning about the need to be prepared.’

She added that she saw this as valuable experience in getting Year 7s ready for high school.

Leaders and teachers both commented on the leaders’ development of problem solving strategies and techniques, and in their confidence to tackle difficult situation as they arose. Teachers noted that the program’s impact not only on the normally ‘good’ students, but on what one described as ‘the surprise packages’: the transformation of some who were ‘major problem’, and of quieter kids ‘coming out’. Students (more than teachers, and mainly leaders) commented on the value for personal development in

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talking about feeling, emotions. Both peer leaders and teachers commented on the growth in confidence in younger students stemming from their interactions in groups with older children.

**Values**

Values was the third most commonly raised theme (16 times). Values, including several of those embodied in the National Framework were specifically mentioned in discussions of different aspects of outcomes and impact of the program: respect, acceptance, tolerance, individual worth, honesty, trust, responsibility.

They also saw the program acting as a form of values education in more general ways; teachers commented on the incorporation of values such as:

- 'what makes a good friend, what makes a good person',
- 'care, looking after others',
- 'diversity... valuing other people'.

Even quite young children recognised a range of values being taught, and claimed that they had learned about such things as responsibility and respect, being considerate to other people, and caring; as one Year 3 student expressed it:

- 'You learn about... if you care about other people... and if you should treat people the way you want to be treated'.

The Principal, Deputy Principal and several of the teachers noted that the program deals with values both explicitly, in the formal content, and implicitly, embedded in the very practices through which the program runs: group-work, collaboration, sharing of ideas and affirmation of others. They saw it as having an impact not only on what students are able to say, but on their attitudes and behaviour: ‘not just talking but doing’.

Some teachers and students also suggest that part of the power of Peer Support program as a form of values education, lies in the fact that it is students rather than teachers talking about and attempting to model the values. One teacher, for example, said that ‘kids talking to kids about it is a lot more valuable than me talking about it. Their discussions
are [perceived as] more genuine. If it’s the teacher talking about it they’re thinking “what’s she getting at now”.’ Another commented that:

‘we need within the school culture to work towards kids reflecting on and taking ownership of their own values...There’s always the problem of kids mouthing the correct answers, but Peer Support is more honest. They don’t feel they can get into trouble for saying the ‘wrong thing’...They don’t dissemble because they feel a need to please’.

Similarly, a Peer Leader explained that

‘it makes them think about the way they feel...it’s better taught by kids, especially with the younger ones’.

At the same time, the Principal and some teachers expressed the view that the potential for using the PS program to teach about and cultivate values was still largely untapped potential. Indeed, the Principal suggested that it had the potential to function as the lynchpin in the school’s teaching of values

**Taking Responsibility**

Staff and students also frequently referred to the increasing extent to which senior students, as Peer Leaders, were taking responsibility both within and beyond the program (14 times). While it is impossible to demonstrate that the Peer Leader program contributes to this, all those who talked about this issue saw the Peer Support program as a key contributor.

Teachers saw Leaders taking responsibility primarily in relation to their peer group role: in peer group, including, in some cases, a ‘heavy commitment… to preparation for sessions’. Some also noted cases where students who were normally disruptive in class, or who had a history of disruptive behaviour in earlier grades ‘stepping up’ in Peer Support sessions. They also suggested that Leaders displayed ‘more sense of ownership with the little ones’ and ‘taking responsibility for wellbeing in the playground’.
Two teachers saw at least an indirect impact of the program in promoting responsibility through a change in the way the ‘senior leaders’ badges were awarded. One noted that whereas the badge had traditionally been awarded to all Year 7 students, with no particular obligations or responsibilities, it now had to be earned, via the notion of ‘readiness’ for the badge, and an association of the badge with ‘privileges and responsibilities’. She explained:

‘It has to mean something – I’m a leader – and students now write their own contract’.

The other commented that it is

‘a fantastic thing for older students to take on. It’s one thing to have a badge but another to have responsibility. It’s empowering, it gives ownership’.

Teachers, and some students, also saw the program having an impact in cultivation aspirations to leadership across the Year levels. At a senior level, one teacher related the example of two boys who were frequently badly behaved but who wanted to be involved as Peer Leaders:

‘They’ve worked hard to qualify... they’ve become more responsible. They’re also doing homework, etc.’.

Teachers noted that some Year 6 students are already taking on leadership roles and responsibilities, and that some of the Peer Leaders were particularly adept at getting Year 5 and Year 6 group members involved in Group activities by sharing responsibility with them.

One teacher saw the way Peer Leaders, especially, were taking on more responsibility and becoming ‘role models’ within the school, as having a quite broad impact. This had an effect of:

‘Establishing a culture of values in the school... and younger children see and strive towards that’.

This sense of a growing ‘culture of values’ was reflected quite generally in the interviews with Leaders and some of the Year 6 students: underpinning much of their talk is the
taken for granted assumption that students – especially older students - *ought* to take responsibility.

A sub-theme in the comments on the impact of the program and student responsibility concerned the ways Peer Leaders exercised their leadership roles. Teachers and students commented on the way Leaders worked cooperatively, sharing work and responsibilities not only between themselves but with others in their groups. One leader suggested that they had an important communicative role and that they were sometimes better able to explain the importance of the concepts and values that formed part of the Peer Support Program because

> ‘It’s more than just having a teacher tell you... its being able to think with the ‘mind of a child’.

One teacher, in particular, made a point of commenting that it was not a ‘bossy’ style, but a ‘softer’ more collaborative mode of leadership. When one student said he enjoyed being a leader because he could be bossy, everyone laughed at the joke. More significantly, perhaps, that what they *claimed*, is what their comments *revealed* about their leadership. When they described what it meant to be a leader they talked about problem solving, the need to be organised and attentive to others. Their comments recognised and affirmed the worth of others, especially younger students (‘They come up with a lot of really good ideas that I would never have thought of’), and they related incidents in which they shared responsibilities with others. Their taking up of leadership in terms of *helping* rather than ‘bossing’ is typified in the story related by one Peer Leader. A group of Year 7 students, all Peer leaders, were approached during lunch by a younger student, leading an even younger child with a grazed knee.

> ‘Excuse me... he grazed his knee. Can you help him”. So you give it a wash, give it a rub and he’s ok. He really just needed a bit of TLC’.

**Behaviour**

While Behaviour Management was one of the most commonly perceived reasons for introducing the Peer Support program into the school, it ranked only fifth among the interview themes identifying impacts of the program. This does not reflect any lack of
confidence that the program is serving to enhance the school’s behaviour management strategy. I have noted already the Principal’s and Deputy Principal’s belief that the program had already had a significant impact in reducing behavioural problems. Classroom teachers and students alike shared their views.

In the context of the Peer Support group sessions, and the recruitment of Peer Leaders, teachers related several instances of ‘dramatic improvement’ in children who had been ‘major problems’, and who moderated their behaviour in order to participate fully in the program. One of these involved a child whose behaviour reflected his low levels of achievement in class, but who was able to experience a sense of success as a Leader in Peer Group sessions. Another teacher commented that:

‘We had great fear for [2005’s incoming Year 7s] behaviourally… but it hasn’t turned out that way… I think that’s a result of senior leader program of which PS is large part’.

At the same time, one teacher pointed out, improvements in behaviour within the Peer Group session did not always translate into the ‘normal’ classroom.

Some teachers also saw the program having an impact on behaviour more broadly, or more diffusely, through improvements in the quality of relations and attitudes, the greater sense of responsibility and ownership among senior students, and the development of more positive techniques for problem-solving and dealing with issues. They saw this both as reducing the incidence of bullying, and as providing more protective resources when bullying occurred. The Deputy Principal related the reduction of students being placed on the Behaviour Management Plan’s ‘Steps’ to the role of Peer Support in providing a mode of reasoning about behaviour that might have been implicit but was not explicit in the Plan itself.

Both staff and students interviewed saw these positive developments in the school as at least partly attributable to the Peer Support program. Teachers, in particular, commented about what they saw as an already noticeable difference in the atmosphere of the school, and its potential for even greater impact over the medium- to long-term. Children across the year levels commented that they felt the program had led to more comfortable

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relations between younger and older students and that this had contributed to making the school a better place.

**Difficulties**

Staff identified difficulties related principally to matters of implementation, both strategic (i.e., its position within the overall school program) and practical (e.g., the general lack of space in the school with current high enrolments). Even though asked specifically to comment on any problems they saw in the nature and design of the program itself, no teacher identified any such problems.

Peer leaders, also focused on difficulties in implementation, in particular those concerned with effective management of behaviour in their groups, but also difficulties related to the involvement of children with disabilities. While they evidently spent time in briefing and debriefing sessions dealing with such matters and were able to name a range of strategies for addressing them, such matters clearly remain important challenges to be attended to.

They also identified, in ways that were impressively sophisticated and aware, some difficulties they considered affected some students’ engagement with the program, quite apart from ‘misbehaviour’. In particular, they discussed the problem of older (Year 6 but also Year 5 and especially male) students’ façade of ‘cool’. They appeared to maintain a consensus that these students ‘like it, but they just don’t like showing it’ and consequently were either disruptive, or refused to share ideas and feelings.

Some teachers in particular had raised questions about students’ level of understanding of the content, and student interviews, both in this school and elsewhere, had indicated that younger students might enjoy the games but fail to grasp the content or the point of them, and that even the older students might have difficulties with some of the concepts the program deals with. Consequently, I intentionally explored this issue in interviews with students.

A number of students, including but not limited to Peer Leaders, identified similar or related problems in the nature of the program itself. Significantly, it was one of the younger students who said that
‘There’s too much just easy stuff and that makes it boring’

and another of similar age who commented that

‘there’s too much drawing pictures... we do that every week and it gets boring’.

From the other end of the age spectrum, one Leader commented that

‘it needs to be challenging for the older kids and also for the younger kids’,

while another added that

‘the activities are for younger people... [they] need to be for all kids to participate... They need to try and mix it’.

From the Year 6 and 7 students, I gained the distinct impression that while they would have preferred the material to be less directed towards younger students’ needs, they tolerated it in the context of their more general appreciation of the program. This seems to reflect what again appears to be a highly sophisticated appreciation of the nature of the program. The discussion by one group of Leaders on the role of ‘games’ in the program, unfolded through the following sequence of comments:

‘Well, the idea is really to learn about each other...’

‘That’s what the games are for...’

‘They’re not games like... soccer, but games to get us to learn things’

Finally, they identified – and demonstrated - problems in the complexity and difficulty of some of the concepts. One commented:

Some of the ideas are easy...things that everybody already knows, like friendship. But some of them, like...

connectedness [she stumbled over the word] are very difficult, even for leaders’.

And at several points in the interviews when I asked students of various ages to explain the ideas dealt within Peer Group sessions, their attempts tailed off into a uncertainty - ‘connectedness is when you’ve got things in common... sort of’ - followed by an account of the activity through which they had addressed the idea.
These are clearly issues that will warrant further attention if the school decides to continue with the program.

**Peer support program- challenges/future directions**

My assessment of the variety of data from all sources indicates that the program is strongly supported by all those involved, and that it already enjoys significant success in impacting students’ positive experience in and of the school, their relationships with each other, particular with those of different ages, the sense of wellbeing among younger students and of responsibility and care among the senior students.

The central question for the school to explore at this time in relation to Peer Support, therefore, appears to be whether the program is to be implemented across the school, as a necessary condition for it to become more powerfully embedded in the school’s culture and performance. Its potential is clearly limited by its current mode of operation. Professional Development of staff, training of student leaders, resourcing, and longer term planning, including planning for more systematic integration of the program into both the whole school Behaviour Management strategy and the core curriculum all necessarily suffer from the current mode of implementing the program through only part of the school, and are likely to be enhanced by implementation across the whole school.

The following issues are either explicit in the data collected, or arise from a careful consideration of the data as a whole, and appear to warrant further consideration by the school community:

1. **Visibility:** If it is to become pivotal to school operations, then the visibility of the program might need to be significantly enhanced. Here, communication with parents is likely to be crucial. One staff member identified a case of parent resistance to the program based on a misperception of the nature and purpose of the program. The program might, for instance, be highlighted in a range of key school documents from the school’s Behaviour Management Plan, and Information Booklet to the more regular Newsletters; the website, if it were...
developed, this would be another avenue. Annual celebrations of Peer Leaders may also be a mechanism to promote the program to the community.

2. **Integration into Curriculum and Behaviour Management Strategy.** As it stands the program is positioned as an optional extra within school teaching time. This appears likely to weaken parent support: if it is not important enough to be included as an integral part of the program for all students, and if it is understood as part of behaviour management, then parents might reasonably question the value of taking class time for it. The role of teachers, possible links with the KLAs, and the value of a debriefing for all classes could all be further explored.

   a. **Values.** If the school further integrated the Peer Support program as an integral part of its curriculum, the values enunciated in the National Framework could also be made more visible in the schools mission and policies, and more identifiable and explicit in the school’s teaching and learning program. In so far as schools might in future be held more accountable for their teaching of these values, there would be clear advantages to the school in being able to readily demonstrate their place in the school’s overall program.

3. **Staff training.** Only three members of staff have undertaken formal Peer Support Foundation training (one currently with only limited duties in the school), and training was identified by the Principal as a professional development need. Even without the training, staff interviewed appeared highly positive about the program, and to have a reasonable understanding of its underlying intent and principles. However, several stressed their lack of training, and their reliance on the orientation and overviews provided by the organising teacher. More extensive training might enable a wider sharing of responsibilities and roles among staff, a matter of some importance in such a large school.

4. **Resourcing:** An annual budget allocation would enable the more systematic and adequate development of resources, would facilitate ongoing professional development of staff and the training of Peer Leaders in ways more in keeping with their needs.
with Program Guidelines. Teachers and students reported that some groups were working in very close proximity or under other conditions that interfered with the effective running of groups; more systematic implementation would allow the school to address such matters free of competition with other parts of the school program.

5. **Student involvement.** Student leaders described the importance of continually discussing the skills of group management. Several Peer Leaders expressed a sense of frustration in relation to management issues within their groups. Students at lower year levels indicated that they would like a more active role in group sessions, and some students and teachers told anecdotes of ways leaders had managed to do this, with positive results.

6. **Interest in and understanding of group activities.** As noted already, while the overwhelming majority of students interviewed indicated that they enjoyed the Program, student as well as some teacher comments raise issues about some of the content of the program and the activities through which they are explored. These warrant careful examination. Peer Leader and other student participant evaluation mechanisms might be a strategy to monitor and address issues related to the program’s curriculum and pedagogy.

**Summary, conclusions and recommendations**

The Program appears to have generated strong support from a large proportion of the staff, and to have made a significant impact on both one of the key indexes of satisfactory student behaviour, and the consciousness and sense of wellbeing of students who participate. Yet it is implemented across only part of the school and remains outside the school’s core business. This appears to limit the impact of the program and its potential to enhance the quality of life in the school.

I also concluded from careful attention to the range of data that the position of Key Teacher, in particular, is likely to be particularly difficult to sustain, from the combination of the high level of professional commitment required, the difficulties attendant on lack of systematic resourcing and the need to organise a program designed to...
be implemented systematically across a whole school community. In this case, based on my own observation, the report of others and evidence in a variety of school documents the organising teacher appears not only to have made a high level of personal commitment to the program, but to be heavily involved in a range of other responsibilities and activities, these stresses are likely to be intensified markedly.

My overall assessment of the program is that while it already appears to make a significant contribution to the quality of school life and has the potential to make an even greater contribution, it is not sustainable in its present form.

A strong recommendation of this report, therefore, is that the School carefully consider the issue of how the program is implemented. Clearly, there are three options:

1. To adopt the program on a whole school basis. Here, two issues appear to be worth considering:
   i. the potential of the program to function as an integral part of the school’s Behaviour Management strategy and of its Curriculum and Pedagogy, in ways that serve to integrate the two; and
   ii. the potential of the program, thus integrated as a key element in the school’s overall program and strategy, in marketing the school as a community in which quality learning and the social and personal wellbeing of students form part of a comprehensive overall school development strategy.

2. To continue the program on a voluntary, part-school basis. In this case, it will be imperative for the school to consider:
   i. ways to ensure that the work of organising and managing the program is made sustainable;
   ii. ways to adequately resource the operation of the program across those classes that do opt to participate.

3. To discontinue the program.
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