Case study of the PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM

at

Garbutt State School

Completed as part of the

Values Education Good Practice Schools Project (2005)

[At this school] “It’s not a divided situation where this is what the teachers say and this is what the children are doing, so its not coming down upon the children; its coming from the children and together we proceed” (Teacher).

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School Background and context

Garbutt State School was established in 1932 and currently the school has a diverse student population of 140 students. The majority of students are drawn from the local geographical area. Seventy percent of students are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and 10% are South Sea Islanders (Tokelau). A wide range of language groups and localities are reflected in this population, including students from all parts of Queensland, and the Torres Strait. Ten percent of students are under the care of the Department of Child Safety. The school has a high mobility rate and promotes daily student attendance with a Parent Liaison Officer.

The late nineties saw considerable investment in the local area under the State Government’s Community Renewal program. Although the school took a central role in this period, there was a decline in student enrolment due to a reduction in the availability of local public housing. Enrolment has now stabilised and the school has a positive image in the wider community with national awards for literacy programs and close relationships with a range of community organizations. School resources are continually improving through local business and government sponsorships for air-conditioning etc. The area and the school’s population can generally be described as reflecting Townsville’s lower socio-economic levels with low levels of paid employment in the community. This school profile is reflected in a range of school functions, including a fund for student emergency school lunches.

The school’s mission and vision are a clear assertion of the school’s core values. The school’s motto urges students to do their best, and the mission statement urges integrity, honesty, care and compassion.

Motto: We aim high

Mission: To foster honesty, learning, consideration and fun.

The teaching staff of seven have all worked at the school for less than 6 years, and each year there is some considerable staff mobility. The school has a range of ancillary staff including teacher aides, and specialist staff that spend varying time each week in the
school. A specialist cultural studies teacher works closely with teaching staff and community elders.

In addition to the Peer Support program, there are two other interrelated features of the school’s ethos that focus on the development of students’ values. Firstly, the school places a strong emphasis on the development of student identity and self-concept through a well-developed cultural studies program. This program utilises local community elders and strong partnerships with local Indigenous organizations. The second feature is the mandated code of behaviour that applies for all those who enter the school—students, parents, staff and visitors. The code is generally referred to as the 5 Cs.

1. Be Courteous
2. Be Caring
3. Use Commonsense
4. Be cooperative
5. Show consideration

Staff describes the cultural studies program, the Code of Behaviour and the Peer Support program as complementary, sharing similar underlying philosophies and goals as well as being central to the school’s vision of creating a safe and supportive environment.

**Peer Support program –overview**

The Peer Support program was introduced to Garbutt State School in 2000 following an unsuccessful application for funding for a social skills program through the Community Renewal program. The Principal describes the rationale for the introduction to the Peer Support program as related to the student cohort at that time. In the cohort, many students were perceived to need support to engage with protocols for behaviour within the school and also in a range of contexts outside the school such as museums, theatre etc.

The visiting behaviour management teacher suggested the introduction of the Peer Support program, which, although was not considered at the time to address all the social skills needing developing, contained many overlapping aspects with the original rejected...
Teachers who were at the school in 2000, describe a particular cohort of students in Year 7 in 2000 who displayed a range of challenging behaviours and were generally felt to have low self-esteem. Racism, bullying, and cultural misunderstandings were commonplace according to the teachers interviewed. Additionally, there was a need for conflict resolution skills and the development of leadership skills.

The program is now coordinated by the Year 7 teacher and involves all students and all school staff including the Principal. Both Year 6 and Year 7 students are designated as leaders, with Year 7 students referred to as ‘Peer Leaders’ and Year 6 students ‘Peer Support trainees’. The student leaders are prepared for their role through participation in a 3-day camp, that in 2005 was held on Magnetic Island. The school has a policy of inclusion of all students in school activities and so subsidises student attendance at activities such as camps. The student contribution to cost of the camp in 2005 was $40.00. Following the camp, the student leaders are officially inducted into their role in a whole school ceremony. The ceremony involves the Year 7 students signing a leadership contract, the presentation of a ‘leadership’ shirt, and a badge. Each Year 6 student signs a contract as a Peer Support Trainee and receives a badge. The ceremony includes the attendance of the local State Member of Parliament, and other community dignitaries.

The Peer Support lesson is conducted each Tuesday at 12.30pm, and Year 6 and 7 students are prepared for the lesson on Monday from 1.45pm – 2.45pm. The current Year 6 and 7 teachers complete this preparation jointly with the students. A copy of the lesson is distributed to all teachers prior to the session. The Peer Leaders work with a group of between 6-10 students but this often varies due to student mobility.

The Peer Support Foundation materials focus on the development of self-regulated individuals who can
- Take responsibility for their own wellbeing
- Deal positively, proactively and resiliently with their life experiences
- Be actively involved in, and supported by their community.

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These aims and the underlying philosophy of this program are clearly aligned with the articulated philosophies at Garbutt State School. The Peer Support program is now an integral part of the school’s philosophy and is visible in almost all school policies. The school’s Drug Education policy for example, makes links between the students’ ability to develop positive self-concept and effective communication (as developed in the Peer Support program) and the ability to make informed decisions about drug use as part of a healthy lifestyle. The Behaviour Management program lists a series of key elements as the framework for student behaviour and includes the following:

- A shared responsibility for all students, parents and staff
- Peer Support Program
- School leaders and Trainee leaders Program for Year 6 & 7 students

Further, the Behaviour Management program lists a range of “responsibilities of all” that clearly relate to the qualities fostered in the Peer Support program. These include:

- Treat everyone with courtesy and respect
- To be an effective listener
- To use positive language

Class buddies, mentors, and the Peer Support program are all listed as procedures for upholding the code. The Behaviour Management Plan includes reference to the use of peers to develop plans to address behaviour problems. A series of levels have been developed to address behaviour issues, and at each level, positive actions are listed.

As these comments below indicate, the Peer Support program now aligns with the core vision of the school.

*We don’t see Peer Support as a separate thing, it is a part of Garbutt what we do, a whole school approach. Its one tool we use to build community and relationships (Principal).*

*Peer Support really complements and reinforces everything else that happens in our school community (Teacher).*
Peer Support program – impact

The case study was completed following interviews with 6 teachers, the principal and three groups of students. In addition the following school material was reviewed.

- The School Information Booklet
- School promotional brochure
- The School Annual Report of Progress
- School Curriculum Plan
- Policy for Drug Education
- Multi-literacy project 2004
- School Disciplinary Absence Data 2000-2002
- Middle School action plan
- School Opinion Survey data (2002-2004)
- Behaviour Management Program 2005
- Sample School Newsletters
- Leadership camp program
- School Leaders’ Contract 2005
- Sample units of work
  - Peer Support teacher induction material prepared by Peer Support Coordinator

Quantitative impact of the program

The School Opinion Survey data reveals high levels of satisfaction from students, staff and parents in relation to the general climate of the school. The School Climate measure, for example, which maps student behaviour, student feelings of safety, and the school’s sense of fairness, reveals the significant impact the Peer Support program has as part of the overall Supportive School Environment framework. In 2004 the student responses rate the school climate above both the ‘like schools’ and the state schools means. The 2004 means, in particular display levels of satisfaction that indicate a high degree of satisfaction (over 3.2). Table 1 outlines these indicators.

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Staff responses to the School Opinion Survey indicate high levels of satisfaction in most domains, with two key performance areas, staff morale and relationships rated above the ‘state’ and ‘like schools’ means in 2003 and 2004. These areas include staff relationships with students, and staff feelings of safety.

The School Disciplinary Absence data reviewed indicates generally low levels of school suspension, except for a period in 2002. Since then, less than 3 students have been suspended each year.

**Qualitative impact of Peer Support program**

In addition to the strong infiltration of the Peer Support program in school policy documents the Peer Support program can be identified as having a range of effects.

**Student cohesion and the development of social skills**

Following the introduction of the Peer Support program in 2000, staff describe the program’s almost immediate impact on the social cohesiveness of the school. The situation at the time, with some particularly difficult Year 7 students had led to a situation where staff were hesitant to complete playground duty and the general school atmosphere needed significant improvement. One teacher describes the situation as follows.

> When I first started here in 2000, we weren’t allowed to play in year levels, mixing year levels, ...as a result of fights in the playground. [...] I would be tentative to do playground duty (Teacher).

Once Peer Support was introduced however, school visitors often commented on the changed atmosphere.

> The best thing for me was that we would have visitors to the school and they would say, “What have you done? What’s going on, gee this school feels nice” (Teacher).

Most staff refered to the need to view the impact of Peer Support with a longitudinal perspective. Now five years on, all staff interviewed commented on the cohesion

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apparent in the playground. Recently appointed staff commented favourably on the school atmosphere, the lack of bullying or other anti-social behaviour in the school.

“That’s one of the stand out things that I have noticed since coming here. There are very few playground instances” (Teacher).

Students consistently described the ways in which the Peer Support program had provided them with strategies to deal with bullying. All students interviewed could describe the actions they would take if bullied and were clear in their assertion that bullying was now minimal in the school playground.

We have learned how to play games, and how to take care of people when they get hurt (Year 4)

We have a bully triangle, and you write stuff in it (Year 3 student).

Staff also noted the impact on the school’s highly mobile population.

Prior to Peer Support it was like a pecking process and if we had conflict it usually happened in the playground with new enrolments – Peer Support really addresses those issues – how do you make friends, how do you meet people so Peer Support has really assisted (Principal).

While the impact of the Peer Support program is apparent in these examples, the strong alignment between Peer Support, the Behaviour Management framework and the school code of conduct has created an underlying school culture that fosters a particular set of values. Adults in the school community are asked to model a range of behaviours that support the school’s ethic, giving coherence to the Peer Support program’s aims. Staff in the school referred to this on a number of occasions during the interview process.

“It’s not a divided situation where this is what the teachers say and this is what the children are doing, so its not coming down upon the children it’s coming from the children and together we proceed” (Teacher).

Developing student identity

The Peer Support program is seen as a part of, and an extension to, the school’s well-developed Cultural Studies program. The Cultural Studies teacher has consistently provided advice in relation to the implementation of Peer Support in the school.

A lot of what we wanted to put into Peer Support, came from our cultural background, who we are and who other people think we are, [dealing wit] put
downs and negatives and [the Peer Support Coordinator] is able to address those issues because of what we do in Peer Support (Teacher).

The Peer Support grouping strategy provides a vehicle to develop and extend concepts related to identity. One example of the link between these programs is an activity referred to as the ‘language tree’ where students were encouraged as part of a Peer Support lesson to use a home language and include a word in a community ‘tree’. In such a diverse community, the peer groupings are seen to provide a safe place to explore identity and develop understanding and acceptance of diversity. As one teacher described

[The] language tree- done in Peer Support groups was more powerful than in class groups. Remembering their ancestors

Additionally, staff recognise that consistent modelling of a set of behaviours such as those used in Peer Support supports a diverse community.

The community members come and they see Peer Support happening and that’s important to the wider community (Principal).

I have seen some of the community members a bit confused- why is it that we have a program that asks students to conform to more acceptable norms (teacher).

The consistency of the Peer Support program clearly supports the school’s goals in relation to the development of student’s cultural identity. One teacher commented that while the school’s cultural Studies program is renowned, with Indigenous teacher aides presenting strong role models to students, the effectiveness of it is sometimes hindered by fluctuations in teacher aide funding. The Peer Support program however, is able to reliably support the development of student’s self-identity given its relatively low cost impost.

Developing student leadership skills

Staff describe the need to nurture the development of student leadership qualities in the context of the school community. One teacher commented that the Peer Support program along with other school experiences provide students’ first insight into leadership roles.
[The students are] seeing leadership and being part of leadership for the first time.

Some students had even questioned teachers about the rationale for being a leader. One teacher reported the following student comment.

*Why am I participating in Peer Support, why do I have to show leadership to the younger kids?*

The leadership roles are strongly promoted through a range of symbols including the leaders’ shirts, contracts, and badges. In addition, the *Peer Leaders* and trainee leaders organise the weekly parade, and administer the sports equipment at lunchtime. This strong celebration of leadership, alongside the allocation of clear leader roles conveys to both students and community members the importance of leadership and taking responsibility. A behaviour management process that withdraws leadership status if the code of behaviour is consistently breached reinforces this. If a breach occurs, the student’s shirt is withdrawn, and the student is asked to develop a contract, with the support of another student in order to get the shirt back. This withdrawal strategy was strongly endorsed by students and according to teachers, by community members as well.

*The kids that have lost their shirt, (they lose it if they reach level three on the behaviour levels) if they lose their shirt, the parents that I have had interactions with, have been really encouraging the kids to get them back (Teacher)*

The celebration of leadership within the school creates a palpable aspiration for students in Year 6. These students describe the range of tasks given to the trainee leaders an animated fashion, clearly looking forward to the next year, although they acknowledge that managing the group will be a challenge. Year 4 students too, describe with considerable regard, the skills of their leaders. They outline the management strategies used by their leaders and clearly state their respect for their leaders, indicating that they work hard for their leaders. When asked why they work hard in *Peer Support*, one Year 4 student promptly replied as follows:

*Because they are our leaders (year 4 student)*

**Staff engagement with the core values of the program**

All staff interviewed, unhesitatingly supported the *Peer Support* program and the way it was implemented in the school. The *Peer Support* coordinator appears to systematically
induct new staff to the program’s aims and how it is implemented across the school. More importantly, the coordinator provides a 7-page handout to staff that includes a personal narrative outlining the rationale for the program in Garbutt State School. This induction material may explain the very high degree of understanding and acceptance of the program across the whole school despite only 2 current teachers having completed the formal Peer Support Foundation raining,

In addition to induction, the Peer Support Coordinator also provides a copy of the lesson to all staff. Teachers consistently articulated their roles in the program outlining their preparation of students prior to and following the lesson.

[Peer Support Coordinator] sends the Peer Support lesson to the teachers before... and so the role of the teacher is to let the kids know what the lesson is about and have a little bit of a discussion before they go to the Peer Support lesson (teacher)

This consistent approach is reflected in student comments about staff commitment and engagement with the lesson content.

The teachers always ask afterwards, what have you learned in your Peer Support program.

Overall, the impression from the interviews is that there is an exceptionally high degree of staff commitment to the program. Several staff noted that all staff seemed committed to the program, and the following teacher quote sums up this commitment.

I can’t remember any barriers put up by staff- I can’t remember any. There may be a lesson where staff say that that lesson was a bit over the top, but that’s it (Teacher).

Peer Support program- challenges/future directions

With the enthusiasm of the staff for the program, future directions for the program were commonly articulated.

1. Nurturing leadership roles

While the leadership roles are clearly assigned, celebrated and nurtured within the school, extending an understanding of leadership beyond the school and into the community may
be a priority for the program. Several leaders were able to describe the impact of their developing leadership skills on their family interactions. One student spoke of how he was able to use the “ROCK” and “WATER” response strategy learned on the leadership camp in their family setting, standing up to an uncle. This is potentially very powerful albeit challenging extension of the Peer Support program.

Staff are already considering these broader conceptions of leadership, with one teacher describing a vision to extend notions of leadership through an excursion to Canberra.

_A grand idea to take a class to Canberra, in winter, and go to the snow and go to Parliament, and AIS and Indigenous leaders. Being an excellent leader can lead on and you can aspire to be leaders in the broader community (Teacher)._

**2. Middle schooling and supporting transition**

While staff were unanimous in their views about the outcomes of the program in the school (leaderships skills, more appropriate social skills, self-managed behaviour etc) three teachers expressed concern that transition to secondary settings remained highly problematic for many Garbutt students. As one teacher summed up, the need for student self-determination and strength is vital if the program is to have a long-term impact.

_It’s no good having a child whose behaviour is managed well in primary school and they walk out the gate. go out to secondary school and their behaviours collapse. It has to have some self-determination._

One teacher noted that there was now some acknowledgement now by one secondary school of the skills developed by Peer Support program. The secondary teacher had reportedly said to students the following.

_I know you are all Peer Support leaders and we need those leadership skills when we get to Year 8._

A core aspiration for the Peer Support program is to create resilient individuals. The school may wish to consider strategies to support transition, and in particular explore ways in which core elements of the program may be reinforced in the secondary transition time by secondary teachers and indeed the secondary school behaviour management policies.
3. **Raising community awareness**

Newsletters, school literature and displays reinforce the importance of the *Peer Support* program across the school. Students and staff believed that parent and family members were generally supportive of the program. One student commented that his parents said the following:

“It’s a good thing that’s happening in your school.

Recently appointed staff were consistent in their praise for the program, and acknowledged that in education forums, it was common to hear of the positive school climate emerging at Garbutt.

*It’s filtered through professional circles (Teacher).*

As the program is further embedded the school may wish to explore how the program can be further articulated as central to the school’s values. Much of the current promotional literature focuses on the program’s strengths as an anti-bullying program, where obviously from this case study there are many other behaviours developed.

4. **Ensuring on going reflection space for lesson suitability**

Several staff commented on the strength of student led activities in the *Peer Support* lesson and the importance of the structured lesson format for the students. The Year 6 and 7 seven teachers however, noted the critical importance of an extensive preparation period for the lesson to ensure student engagement with the underlying concepts.

*They [the Peer Support lessons] are useful; they are fairly well structured, introducing a topic. We spend an hour each Monday afternoon, giving kids examples, second-guessing what kids are going to say*

Some staff considered the content of some of the lessons to be difficult for some leaders and students, particularly the assumptions about the level of oral language students could use and the cognitive nature of many of the concepts citing *empathy* and *emotional bullying* as examples.

*The only thing I have noticed with it it’s fairly cognitive, and for some kids that have English as a second language, some of the concepts can be fairly complicated. You have to be aware of that as a facilitator (Principal).*

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Students and teachers made suggestions about additional activities that could support a broader range of student learning styles. One teacher suggested having a variety of media, perhaps a video to introduce bullying etc, something to anchor student discussion. One student summed up his view about the lessons as follows.

“We need more fun things” (Student).

As the school’s well-developed literacy strategy outlines, oral language use is a priority in the Garbutt School community, and teachers are clearly aware of the need to reinforce and develop students’ use of oral language to effectively participate in Peer Support lessons. Continued work on the relationship between oral literacies and the program can only advance its effect.