Case study of the PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM
at
Magnetic Island State School
completed as part of the
Values Education Good Practice Schools Project (2005)

“We do Peer Support…. to make kids understand life”
(Year 6 student journal entry).
School Background and context

Magnetic Island State School is situated in Nelly Bay on Magnetic Island, 8 km off the mainland. Magnetic Island is classified as a suburb of Townsville and much of the island and surrounding water is Marine National Park and World Heritage listed. Current enrolment is 214 students and the school has a history spanning 80 years. The school population is predominately of Anglo-Celtic heritage but around 9% of the students are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders. The school is characterised by a stable student and staff population. The school motto reflects the value of ‘doing your best’ - “Achievement through Effort”. The school mission is as follows:

“Magnetic Island State School fosters fulfilment and personal success in a caring environment”

Aside from the challenges inherent in any small school, the school’s physical location presents some issues. Transport to the island is available by regular ferry but student participation in a range of mainland activities is limited by the ferry timetabling. Visiting specialist teachers also commute to the school using this service. An additional and more significant challenge is the potentially changing demographic of the island as a wave of development is presently creating an investment surge. There is an uncertainty about the nature of the future island population. The current Principal was appointed to the school in 1999.

Despite the relative physical isolation, the Triennial School Review demonstrates a strong commitment to collaboration with surrounding state schools, including the promotion of staff professional development through the TEACH cluster.

Peer support program-overview

The Peer Support program was introduced in 2001 following conversations between with the visiting Behaviour Management teacher, the Principal and a Year 7 teacher. The introduction coincided with an overall review of the school’s Behaviour Management plan. The Principal describes a real need at the time to shift student behaviour to a more student self-regulated approach. The Peer Support program now appears as a component
of the Supportive Behaviour Management Plan alongside a range of other initiatives to promote a more student centred approach to behaviour management and the development of “active and informed citizens” including the following activities.

- Stop/think/do; together we can work it out (Anti Bullying Program)
- Weekly gold and silver certificates
- ‘Maggie Kids’ section of school newsletter promoting student achievement and excellence

Other teachers also describe the introduction of the program as a specific attempt to develop leadership skills with Year 7 students, increasing their responsibility within the whole school community and specifically their role with the younger students. Previously, the Year 7s were designated school leaders but did not appear to have many definable tasks allocated to this responsibility.

The program is organised as per the Peer Support Foundation’s guidelines, with a designated coordinator (Year 7 teacher) and one designated half hour lesson for all students in the school per week, during Terms Two, Three and Four. 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 Year 7 teacher. The ‘Peer Leaders’ work with a group of students from all year levels. The Year 7 teacher debriefs the peer support leaders after each session.

The Year 7 students are prepared for their peer leader role by an annual 3-day camp held away from the school and paid for by parents during Term 1. The camp activities are led by the Principal and Year 7 teachers, and include a range of activities to prepare students for their leadership role, including challenging self-awareness and group facilitation activities.

Once training is completed, each classroom teacher supervises two to three 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.
evaluation sheet is provided to teachers to record the progress of the group and return to the coordinator. The classroom teachers are informed of the content of the Peer Support program by the Peer Support coordinator through a regular segment as part of the staff meeting.

Aside from the designated weekly half hour, the school is increasingly using the Peer Support groupings to support the operation of a whole range of activities including the “tabloid sports day” and the “Reef Guardian Project”. This infiltration of Peer Support to overall aspects of the school organization is discussed later as a key project impact.

The program is supported by a designated Year 7 teacher/coordinator and teacher aide time. The teacher/coordinator does not receive any additional non-contact time to coordinate the program. Initially the teacher aide time is estimated to be approximately 2 hours per week, including photocopying and preparation of a range of student resources from blackline masters supplied by the Peer Support Foundation. Now, five years after the program’s inception, approximately one half hour per week of teacher aide time is required. Resources are stored in a designated filing cabinet and a budget for approximately 30 photocopy sheets per Year 7 student per year is assigned.

Another significant aspect of the resourcing for the program includes the completion of training offered by the Peer Support Foundation. The training costs $300(?) per teacher and the school is also required to provide TRS for the training day. An additional cost borne by the school is the purchase of Peer Leader’s shirts at approximately $30 each shirt. The school used part of the Behaviour Management grant to support the purchase of the shirts. Other resources required and provided by the school include scrapbooks for all students (to use throughout their years in Peer Support) and a display folder for each Year 7 student. Plastic zip-lock bags are also an essential resource for material storage.

The case study was completed using a range of data to evaluate the program’s impact. Interviews took place with the Principal, and 7 of the 8 classroom teachers. Four student
focus group interviews were conducted, each with 5 students. One Peer Support lesson was also observed. A range of school documents were provided for review including:

- The School Information Booklet
- The School Annual Report of Progress
- The Triennial School Review
- School Opinion Survey data (1999-2004)
- Behaviour Management Plan
- Behaviour Management Register
- Sample School Newsletters
- Sample Year 6/7 Journals
- Student evaluations of Peer Support completed as part of the Triennial School Review
- Leadership camp program

**Peer support program–impact so far**

**Quantitative data**

School opinion survey data and the behaviour management register were reviewed to determine any measurable change since the program’s introduction. While it should be noted that it is not possible to “quarantine” the impact of the Peer Support - many other aspects such as staffing changes, curriculum changes and physical changes may all contribute, the data below are provided as indicative shifts since the introduction of the Peer Support program in 2001.

1. **School Opinion Survey data 1999-2004**

The school staff (teaching and non-teaching) consistently rate as ‘satisfactory’ areas such as ‘staff morale’ and ‘relationships’. Responses from staff place the school aspects of ‘staff morale’ and ‘relationships’ (including relationships with students) as above the ‘state mean’ and above ‘like schools’. As outlined in Table 1, the mean indicators for the school have remained high and increased marginally.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Mean Staff</th>
<th>Mean</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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*Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Magnetic Island State School- Draft Case Study*
Analysis of the survey responses from students indicate more significant trends, although some caution needs to be used in interpreting the data as the items or questions asked appear to have shifted in the time period reviewed. This indicator measures areas such as feelings of safety within the school and the general behaviour of students. The mean responses from the students are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Mean Learning Environment/Climate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>2.43 (flagged as below ‘like schools’)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2.77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>3.36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The shift in measures of learning climate are also reflected in the 2004 measure of school climate where Magnetic Island State School shows mean ratings at marginally above both state schools and like schools.

Significantly for the Peer Support program, the item question “Students are treated fairly at this school” shows means above ‘state’ and ‘like schools’.

2. Behaviour Management Register

From 1999 the school administration team systematically record annual behaviour problems (level 2 or above) within the school. The register records student name, behaviour offence, restitution, and certification of parent acknowledgement of problem. A review of these records indicates two clear trends. The first is a dramatic decrease in the number of problems referred as level 2 offences. The second trend is the nature of the offence. In 1999, the predominate behaviour issues recorded related to physical violence or bullying. In 2004, the record reveals almost negligible levels of physical abuse, with most...
offences related to verbal misdemeanours or mild disobedience such as ‘not following teacher instructions’.

**Qualitative data**

Interview data revealed wide-spread and generally strong support for the program from staff and students alike. Aside from enjoying many of the activities in the *Peer Support* game (building jack in a box and the tissue game for example), improved relationships between students were consistently reported as the key impact of the program. The Year 7 Peer Leaders were described by teachers as increasingly displaying **care** of the younger students, and taking higher levels of **responsibility** for their peers; younger students were described by both students and staff as showing **respect** for their peer leaders; and there was clear evidence that the *Peer Support* process and lessons promoted **understanding** of self and others with increasing impact in the higher years. There were also outstanding examples of *Peer Support* contributing positively to whole school activities and overall organization.

**Relationships and responsibility**

Teachers cited a range of incidents where *Peer Support* leaders took responsibility to ensure differences were resolved in constructive and non-violent ways. Although staff commented that the culture of a smaller school often created a positive environment, differences were noted following the introduction of the *Peer Support* program. The following teacher comments are indicative of this improvement.

“There were two Grade 1 kids and they were really flighty and were running around after morning tea and one of the kids yelled out….so I got the Peer leaders (X and Y)) to go and stop A and B”

“Kids are skipping and they can’t turn the rope then the Peer Support group will step in”

“The little kids look to the older kids in their group- definitely a better connection than before”.

Teachers also observed changed behaviour of students within the *Peer Support* lesson time, generally demonstrating more self-regulated behaviour.
Students who don’t always behave in the classroom, still have problems in their Peer Support lesson but they seem to be a lot less pronounced. They are probably more willing to participate in the lessons that their peers are leading than being told by the teacher.

Students too identified new types of relationships forming as a result of the multi-age Peer Support grouping. Students also commented on the overall impact on the learning environment, noting improvements in overall behaviour. The following students comments demonstrate this perceived enhancement.

- It’s a good way to make new friends, get to know people you wouldn’t know before (Year 4)
- Before I was in my Peer Support group I didn’t know (X) … X has taught me a lot. (Year 4)
- “When I came they were all fighting but the Peer Support leader taught us about cooperation or not participating” (Year 6).
- It’s stopped people going up to the office a little tiny bit (Year 4).

**Understanding of self**

Staff generally expressed reservations about the learning that students could take away from the Peer Support lessons, especially in the younger ages. While the program was described as having an important social value, the concepts or values underlying each lesson were often described as too difficult for the younger children. However long-term involvement in the program was deemed to be beneficial.

Despite the teacher’s reservations, students above Year 2 level made a range of insightful comments about the ways Peer Support had contributed to their understanding of themselves. This comment from a Year 3 student highlights the articulate and concrete way the students described their learning.

- We learned about ‘positive self-talk’. If you get something wrong you don’t go of and say damn I hate myself now, you just go off and say well better luck next time. Like if I get words wrong in journal and stuff (Year 3).
Staff were unanimous in their view that the Year 7s underwent considerable personal growth as a result of the program. This was particularly obvious following the leadership camp. One teacher commented that the school community now anticipated the camp as a catalyst for improved student behaviour! Notably staff not involved in the camp expressed a desire to know more about the camp activities—what was involved etc.

The Peer Leaders were consistent in their praise of the activities and acknowledged a wide range of newly acquired skills. Specifically, students referred to the helium balloon activity as extremely powerful. The following are indicative student comments revealing high levels of personal growth.

*Learn to deal with other people. When (John) came I had trouble controlling him, but I learned to be assertive and now I have lots of different strategies.*
*We learn about our strengths and differences (Year 7)*
*We learned about how others feel when they come into Peer Support (Year 7)*
*[Peer support helps you to learn] to feel positive instead of negative about yourself* (Year 7).
*We learned to feel happy about yourself and who you are and what you can do (Year 7)*
*[We learned] not to be upset about who you are or any problems that you have (Year 7)*

**Whole school organization**

The interview data revealed the degree to which *Peer Support* had impacted on school organization. Key school transition points and whole school activities now reflect the success of the *Peer Support* program.

The school recently introduced *Peer Support* as part of the transition strategy for preschool students. Year 6 students are allocated a preschool student as a buddy. On graduation to Year 7, this same buddy pair is placed together in a *Peer Support* group. This transition strategy promoted leadership and caring qualities in the Year 6 student, and eased the transition for the preschool student.
Teachers also provided two examples of Peer Support groupings being used to operate whole school events- the Tabloid Sports day and the Reef Guardian activity visiting various bays. These events were recalled as outstanding successes with Peer Leaders demonstrating high levels of responsibility and the group members highly respectful of the Peer Leaders authority. The following teacher comment summarises this success.

“it was the best tabloid sports we have ever had and it was because...the teachers had to do very little the Peer Support leaders would organise their kids into the activities”

A further impact of Peer Support program across the wider school community was also noted. Students were asked whether they talked to their parents/family generally about school activities or the Peer Support in particular. All Year 7 students indicated that the preparation that they were required to complete at home for the Peer Support lessons consistently promoted conversations with family members. This was the case for both the strategies for working with younger students (where they sought advice from their parents) and the concepts to be taught each lesson. From the interview data it would appear that students talked more about Peer Support than many other aspects of school life.

Peer support program- challenges/future directions

The central question for the school to explore at this time appears to be whether the Peer Support program is to become more central to the schools ethos and operations. If it is to become pivotal to school operations, then the visibility of the program could be significantly enhanced in key school documents such as the Information Booklet (currently no reference) and the Behaviour Management plan (currently minimally referenced). Should the staff consider the expansion of the program, the following issues may need to be addressed.

1. Staff training. Completing the Peer Support Foundation training was a priority for a number of staff. Without the training, it appeared that staff were less inclined to ‘buy
into’ the overarching philosophy. One teacher described the impact of the training as follows:

“Hallelujah I did the training” I could see the big picture, it was emotionally/physically/spiritually/ everything the whole person was being nurtured and encouraged and given the opportunity to reach potential”.

An annual budget allocation is required to facilitate the training.

2. Teacher involvement in the program. The role for teachers could be further explored. Students described one teacher’s involvement during and after each Peer Support session as very helpful. The teacher modelled management strategies, and debriefed the students at the end of the session praising successful completion of activities. Mostly students felt that teachers did not engage with the lesson concepts either before or after the lesson. The exception to this was the Year 7 class, where the students described systematic support for the program. In addition to staff training, some sort of staff induction process was also suggested (while acknowledging the minimal staff mobility). Rotational observations were also suggested as a strategy to allow teachers to see their students working in a peer group situation.

3. Communication to/with parents. Mostly, it was felt that parents were non-committal or supportive about the Peer Support program, providing minimal feedback to teachers in either a positive or negative manner. Staff identified two instances of parent resistance to the program. One instance involved a parent consistently ensuring their children were absent during Peer Support lesson time. While the newsletter segments provided some insight for parents, a more systematic and wide ranging approach to parent/community awareness and involvement might need to be considered. Explicit information about the camp activities, the peer leadership role, and the concepts covered might be important to minimise passive or active resistance. Annual celebrations of Peer Leaders may also be a mechanism to promote the program to the community.

4. Maintaining Year 7 interest/skill. Students described the importance of continually discussing the skills of group management. One teacher suggested that a mid year skill refresher would be very beneficial and student comments reinforced the idea of
refresher. Two Peer Leaders described their peers feeling ‘stressed’ by the management issues within their groups.

“Some kids are getting really stressed about it, because some kids have some really naughty kids in their group.”

“Some students think Peer Support is a waste of time- because they are getting really frustrated by their group”

Maintaining interest in the group activities was also important, with several Peer Leaders commenting on the ‘boring’ or “mind boring” nature of some of the activities. Peer Leader evaluation mechanisms might be a strategy to ensure the Peer Leaders felt more ownership of the lessons taught. Other comments made by students included the timetabling of Peer Support at the end of the day, and the physical layout of the classrooms. On observation of the Peer Support lesson, it was evident that some groups were working in very close proximity and perhaps this did not support effective group management.

Peer Support Program and the National Values Framework

All staff interviewed were aware of the National Values Framework. From the data collected, the Magnetic Island State school implementation of Peer Support program thus far explicitly supports the development of the following values:

- **Care and compassion.** The peer leaders demonstrated outstanding instances of caring for younger students both during the interviews, during the Peer Support lesson, and as described by the teachers.

- **Respect.** Students described the explicit strategies within the Peer Support process that promoted respect for each other and their teachers.

- **Responsibility.** Teachers described numerous examples of students leading activities and taking high levels of responsibility for their peers and their own actions.

- **Understanding Tolerance and Inclusion.** Again the Peer Support process, and in particular the training undertaken for leadership, explicitly promotes inclusive and cooperative group strategies.
The remaining five values could all be argued to be implicit to the Peer Support program and process. If the school further centred the Peer Support program, the nine values would also be more identifiable in the school’s mission and policies, and potentially more central in the school’s teaching and learning program. Obviously these are issues for the school to explore in any future development of the Peer Support program.