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

“‘There’s this one year oner... and he’s really shy, and he gets bad tempered when people aren’t saying anything to him and he feels like only his Peer Leader can help him.”

(Year 7 Peer Group Leader, focus group discussion).
School Background and context

Railway Estate State School is situated in inner suburban Townsville, in an older and lower SES suburb; the school has a history spanning almost 90 years. Current enrolment is approximately 140 (Year 1-7) students. The school population is mixed, with around 15% of the students identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders. The school population is also characterised by high levels of transience. Moreover, parents from more than half the families represented in the school had left school by age 15.

The school has a Principal who has a 0.50 teaching allocation and 7 FTE classroom teaching staff; the majority of these are very experienced teachers, and many have been at the school for a number of years. There are 4 Teacher Aides, and a number of visiting specialists, including a Behaviour Management support teacher.

Aside from the challenges inherent in its small size, the school faces significant challenges from its demographic context. Poverty, low parental educational attainment and transience are all commonly and strongly associated with low school educational attainment levels, capacity to generate resources, difficulties in developing close school-community relations and problematic student behaviour.

The school has explored a number of strategies for addressing these challenges. Internally, it has adopted a variety of programs focused on student welfare and continued to adapt its core curriculum to local needs. To systematically develop strengths across the whole school program, it has adopted a strategy of continually assessing needs, and identifying priorities for concentrated attention over a limited period, rather than fragmenting resources over a wide range of initiatives at any one time. A recent priority was the development of IT resources, including a computer room. Peer Support appears to be presently enjoying priority status. Externally, the school has made use of linkages to other clusters of schools including the TEACH cluster, and other organisations such as JCU to develop programs and support staff in their professional practice and ongoing development.
Data collection

The case study was completed using a range of data to evaluate the program’s impact. Interviews took place with the Principal, and 3 of the 8 classroom teachers, including the acting Program organiser (the regular organiser was on long service leave at the time the case study was being conducted). Four student focus group interviews were conducted, (Yr 2; Yr 3-4; Yr 6 Co leaders; and Yr 7 Leaders), with 4-5 students in each group. One Peer leader briefing session, the following Peer Support lesson and the subsequent leader debriefing session were also observed. A range of school documents were provided for review including:

- SAROP extracts
- School Planning Overview extracts
- School Parent Handbook
- Annual Report to Parents
- Six sample school Newsletters
- School Disciplinary Absences data
- The School Annual Report of Progress
- School Opinion Survey data (2002-2004)
- Behaviour Management Plan
Peer support program-overview

Rationale and purpose

The Peer Support program was introduced in 2004. An attempt had been made to introduce the program several years earlier, but has not been sustained, and one of the current key teachers in the program had undergone some Peer Support Program training at that time. Other initiatives in the areas of behaviour management and personal and social development had also been introduced. Interview data suggests that this was a school looking for a sustainable program to improve the quality of personal and social relations in the school. Two of the staff members interviewed commented that the school had not been ‘a happy place’, in particular, that it had been characterised by behavioural problems.

In this context, the Principal describes the program as principally concerned with the twin concerns of behaviour management and student welfare: ‘The staff were concerned with the welfare of students and saw this as something that could contribute to that’, adding that while behaviour was a major issue for all schools, welfare was ‘an even bigger issue’. While other teachers saw the introduction of the Peer Support as more explicitly and specifically tied to managing problem behaviour, the ways they talked about behaviour management – in terms of developing ‘caring classes’, getting children to ‘take responsibility for their own behaviour’ and to ‘manage their own behaviour’, for instance - were broad and strongly positive. The Principal explained his rationale for this approach thus:

‘As soon as you step away from the child and punish him you burn another bridge... and some of those kids are really needing as many bridges as they can get.’

It is perhaps noteworthy in this context that the Behaviour Management Plan is headed ‘Promoting Learning’. Underlying this approach is the assumption that ‘if you’ve got personal development happening positively, you’ve got little [mis]behaviour. Kids feel better about themselves and don’t get caught up in all this other stuff’.

Interviews with the Principal and staff also suggested that the Program was seen as a complement to and extension of existing initiatives to recognise and promote student...
leadership in the school. The school had already instituted the position of School Captain, and had captains for its various sporting teams. Peer Support Program, through its institution of Peer Leaders was seen as a way of recognising and capitalising on the leadership potential of a wider range of senior students. Apart from these programs, I observed the informal recognition of student leadership and initiative in the School Assembly, where students made a number of announcements which might easily have been made by staff.

Other rationales or potential purposes the program was seen to serve included enhancing relationships across the ages and grades in the school, and providing

‘another program that could show the kids that they are valued’.

The position of Peer Leader is seen to function beyond the confines of the Peer Support Program, and is invested with formal recognition. Leaders are awarded badges of office at a school assembly, as part of what one staff member described as a ‘serious scenario’ in which they make a public commitment to take a responsible leadership role within the school community.

The Peer Support Program is also made visible in a variety of ways, and linked in various ways not already identified to the broader school program. It is visible, for instance, in School Newsletters, which feature a regular ‘column’ on the program, in the Annual Report to parents and in the School Annual Report and Operational Plan. Through its links to the school’s behaviour management strategy it is also implicitly linked to the National Values Framework, which formed one of the points of reference in the review and revision of the Behaviour Management Plan. Related themes in the school life are also visible, in the ‘Rights and Responsibilities’ displayed in the school which includes both behavioural issues such as respect, and environmental issues of safety, and in notices for such community caring activities as 40 Hour Famine.

It seems clear, then, that the program was introduced as part of an ongoing search for ingredients to complement and extend a broader, multifaceted approach to shaping the school in ways that responded to a range of student needs.

Establishment and organisation
The initiative to introduce the program in 2004 appears to have come from staff, familiar with the program through the visiting Behaviour Management teacher (who was involved in the program in other schools in the TEACH cluster), reinforced by personal and professional relations with that teacher. The three teachers interviewed all indicated that while one teacher had played a particularly important initiating role, the program had been widely discussed and there was already an underlying groundswell of support for it before any formal move was made to introduce it. Further, the initiative was undertaken in the context of ongoing personal and professional relations between school staff and ‘outside’ staff, knowledge of the program’s reputation, and the high professional standing of the initiating teachers.

The program is supported by a designated Year 7 teacher/coordinator and teacher aide time. The coordinator does not receive any additional non-contact time to coordinate the program. Several teachers commented that the additional load for the coordinating teacher was very heavy, but that once resources were established, and the program operating, this reduced to a relatively minor addition to the ‘normal’ workload. In the absence of the teacher who coordinated the program in the first year it was impossible to secure a meaningful estimate of the extent of the additional load in setting up the program. The teacher aide time is used mainly for including photocopying of session materials from black line masters supplied by the Peer Support Foundation. Resources are stored in a designated filing cabinet.

Budget decisions appear to be made as part of an overall strategy which identifies special priority needs on a rolling basis; there was, thus, a decision to prioritise this program in order to get it established properly, with some cost to other parts of the overall program. The Principal explained his view that:

'It's no good setting these things up if you're not going to be serious about it...We knew the first year was always going to be more expensive... but there’s a maintenance budget for following years'.

This strategy necessarily entailed the understanding that once the program was established, spending priorities would necessarily shift.

Two of the teachers involved, including the usual coordinating teacher, have received formal Peer Support Foundation training. Costs were unavailable, as this training was
undertaken when the first move to introduce the program was made. No formal training has been undertaken by staff since the re-introduction of the program in 2004, although the Principal indicated that he saw this as important for the ongoing development of the program. Budgetary pressure, following from the school’s size and the socio-economic characteristics of its community, is reflected in the program in decisions to hold the training camp at school, and not to purchase Peer Leader shirts.

*Operation of the program*

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, led by pairs of Year 7 and Year 6 students (‘Peer Leaders’ and ‘Co-leaders’ respectively). Each ‘Peer Leader’ and her or his Co-leader works with a group of approximately 8-10 students from all year levels. Leaders and co-leaders are prepared for this in a half hour briefing session, and assisted to reflect on and evaluate the session, and develop strategies for the future, by the coordinator. At the time the research for this case study was undertaken, the ‘regular’ coordinator was on leave; her part was taken by another of the Yr 7 teachers. Part of the program requires the students to prepare the specific materials for the lesson themselves in out-of-class time. Peer leaders commented that this preparation was usually done at home and might take as little as 20 minutes or as much as a couple of hours; their comments suggested that this varied according to both the particular weekly task, and the commitment of the leader.

The Year 6 and 7 students were prepared for their peer leader role by a 2-day workshop, held at the school (to minimise costs to parents) but timetabled so as to separate it from the ‘normal’ school day, during Term 1. The workshop camp activities were led by the Year 7 teachers, and included a range of activities to prepare students for their leadership role, including self-awareness and group facilitation activities.

Once training was completed, those who were considered to have demonstrated appropriate leadership qualities were selected. Teachers involved noted that it was difficult to decide what leadership qualities students needed to have. They appear to have accepted the likelihood that some leaders would have difficulties at first but would
‘grow into’ the role. Equally, they appear to have taken the view that the position of leader was something that was provisional and dependent on ongoing commitment to fulfil the responsibilities of the position. Badges were awarded as described already. The obligations of leadership appear to have been taken seriously by staff, as well as by many of the students, to the point that some students who have failed to fulfil their responsibilities have had their position – and their badges – taken from them.

During second and third terms, Peer Support ‘lessons’ are held during an allocated half hour; each classroom teacher supervises two such groups. Classroom teachers are informed of the content of the Peer Support program by the Peer Support coordinator; at least some teachers also make a point of regularly providing feedback to the coordinating teacher about how the sessions under their supervision went.

Leaders are prepared for each week’s session by the coordinating teacher in a half hour briefing on the day before. The briefing I observed included a debriefing from the previous week’s session since it had not been possible to follow the usual procedure of debriefing the same day. Students arrived over a period of a few minutes, and, in the absence of the teacher (who was still engaged in teaching her class in the adjacent room), entered the room and settled themselves on the floor. In light of the program’s stress (in both content and procedure) on cooperative and responsible behaviour, it was noteworthy that students were calm, and organised themselves with minimal ‘silliness’ and no conflict over seating space.

The debrief involved reports from each group leader in turn about the session, focusing largely on positive outcomes, but including some identification of problems and discussion of possible strategies for dealing with them. The teacher’s approach clearly modelled the general approach she sought to cultivate among the leaders for conducting their own groups. For example, at one point a member of the group was talking out of turn; the teacher stopped and asked ‘is what you’re doing being fair to me?’ – precisely the recourse to reflective values-based self regulation of behaviour the program endorses. More generally, the teacher’s response to student input was affirming and encouraging. My observation notes record that there were ‘Not many “pleases” and “thank you’s” but the whole tone is respectful, considerate, and supportive, among teacher and students alike’.

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The briefing for the following session followed the script the students would use for the session (the Peer Support Program materials for sessions are tightly scripted), with the teacher stopping frequently to clarify content, ask students if they could explain it, suggest strategies for their own groups, and identify resources needed.

I was able to observe one week’s session; I observed parts of the session in three successive rooms, a total of six groups. Students took a while to settle, despite the efforts of the Leaders, who tried a number of strategies, including requests (‘please come into the circle’) and directive suggestions; their manner was constructive and positive and without a hint of ‘bossiness’. My impression was that the announcement of the theme was somewhat lost in the ‘settling’ phase. The activity involved lying on the floor, closing their eyes and listening to the Leader read a passage leading them through a visualisation exercise: they were to visualise a ‘special place’ to which they could ‘retreat’ at critical moments. A sizeable minority of group members appeared difficult to engage in the activity, although once the exercise was under way most appeared to be at least outwardly conforming.

I watched a second group doing the second part of the exercise, which involved drawing their ‘special place’. Most appeared fairly engrossed in the activity, which was accompanied by generous chatting among them, much of which appeared to be task related. I noted several examples of constructive, low-key leadership by Leaders and Co-leaders. One example of this included a Leader approaching a group member who had finished, and asking him if he could help another student who was having some difficulty. Another involved a Leader asking a Year 3 girl to talk with a Year 1 girl who also appeared to be somewhat isolated. He later explained that ‘she’s very shy and doesn’t really talk to older kids’.

The third phase involved sharing their place and what made it special. The Leader of one of the groups made a decision to depart from the script they were provided with. One announced that as students had not had sufficient time to complete phase two, they wouldn’t proceed to talk about it, but might try to do so next time. He explained to me later that he thought they were already ‘sharing’ informally among themselves and that it was better to allow this to continue than to try to interrupt for the more formal ‘sharing’ (this was the context in which he paired the Year 3 girls with the Year 1 girl).
Across the groups I watched I was impressed by the co-operation between leaders and co-leaders, and the calmness and positive manner they demonstrated.

The school has a strictly ‘hands off’ approach to teacher involvement in these sessions; they are available as a last resort in case for behaviour management difficulties, but otherwise, leaders have, and exercise complete responsibility. As one teacher put it, ‘Teachers don’t baby-sit the leaders’. (In the sessions I saw, no leader had recourse to the teacher.) This was a conscious decision after the first year’s operation of the program; during that year, some teachers had taken a more interventionist role, and it was agreed that this undermined leaders’ position. Teachers ensure the timely arrival of students to the Peer Support lesson (the teachers of at least one of the younger classes ensures that children are toileted before the session to minimise likelihood of interruptions).

Teachers interviewed indicated that they debrief their students as necessary; one teacher has a workbook in which she follows up the weekly session with class-work based on the weekly session, and some teachers make a point of incorporating ideas from the weekly session in their ‘regular’ teaching.

**Peer support program—impact so far**

**Quantitative data**

School opinion survey data and a summary of the Disciplinary Absences data were reviewed to determine any measurable change since the program’s introduction.

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

School opinion survey data for parents and for students show a marked improvement since 2002 in those areas likely to be affected by the Peer Support Program.

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Students</th>
<th>Like schools</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>2.36☆</td>
<td>2.71</td>
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<tr>
<td>2003</td>
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<td>2.85</td>
<td>2.94</td>
<td>2.78</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2.83</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>2.71</td>
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*Performance area: school climate (overall); mean scores*
Performance area: learning climate (overall); mean scores

Most significant is the relation to Like Schools scores: scores marked ✴ are significantly below Like School scores across the state; those marked ✔ are significantly above.

For staff, the key data move in the opposite direction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Like schools</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>3.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>2.67</td>
<td>2.99</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Performance area: Staff morale (overall); mean scores

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<th>Like schools</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>3.14</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>2.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>2.65</td>
<td>2.95</td>
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Performance area: Relationships (overall); mean scores

<table>
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<th>Staff</th>
<th>Like schools</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>2.67</td>
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</table>

Performance area: Support, resources, training (overall); mean scores

While none of the 2004 figures are significantly below Like School scores, this data indicates clearly that the introduction of the Peer Support Program has taken place at the same time as staff morale and related aspects of the staff experience have been deteriorating. While there is nothing in the data to suggest any link, the issue is worth considering both for its own sake and, in relation to the Peer Support Program, for the potential for a fall in staff morale to affect the implementation and impact of the program.

2. Disciplinary Absences data

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These data, for terms 1 and 2 of 2005, show a total of three short term suspensions (2 M, 1 F); none of these students was identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

There are three points to note in relation to these data as evidence of the impact of the program.

1. the program has been running over too short a time-frame for it to produce strong effects in such long-term dimensions of school cultural change as student behaviour;
2. the data provided is too ‘blunt’ to register any such change as may have occurred since the introduction of the program:
   a. numbers in disciplinary absences are too small;
   b. there is no basis for comparison;
   c. a convincing analysis of impact would require records at a much finer level, e.g., of referrals to the office, or to visiting Behaviour Management staff;
   d. ideally, data would register not only reductions in misbehaviour but positive increases in the behaviours the program promotes;
3. It is in any case not possible to “quarantine” the impact of the Peer Support program from other changes in the school, including staffing, curriculum, other policies and related programs (including behaviour management policy and the Friends program) and, in a small population, the gain or loss of particular students.

**Qualitative data**

Interview data indicated wide-spread and generally strong support for the program from staff and students alike. Students reported that they enjoyed many of the activities in the Peer Support Program, in particular, the games. Teachers interviewed commented on the improved tone of the school and related incidents where they saw students demonstrating care for each other, in particular older students caring for younger ones. These data are difficult to discuss in an orderly fashion as they are tightly interwoven, and difficult to separate, or to discuss under separate headings without repetitiveness. Nevertheless, there appear to be five broad headings under which data indicated that the program might be having some effect in the school:

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1. **Students’ responses to the program**

Most of the students interviewed said that they enjoyed the program. Teachers, too, considered that the majority of students enjoyed it. A Year 1 teacher commented that for her class Peer Support was something they looked forward to, and regarded it as the activity that made Tuesdays a special day.

Staff also stated that many students had initially been ‘wary’ and guarded in their participation but had over time become far more active participants. They also saw the response of some of the older ‘hardheads’ as indicative of the overall high standing of the program in students’ eyes. Thus, for example, one referred to:

‘Macho little [...], a real leader among the kids. He pulled out early in the piece. Now he’s come around to wanting to [be part of it] because some of his mates [as leaders] are doing a good job, and getting the accolades for it, too... and he’s not getting the recognition that he’d like’.

Another teacher commented about a child who was being disruptive in one of the groups she supervised.

‘He was purposely doing anything to annoy. We tried to work with him, and finally we decided we needed a break from him. And he couldn’t wait to get back in’.

Others were less convinced, however. Peer Leaders commented that some Year 6 and 7 students, in particular, felt the program was rather ‘uncool’ and remained disengaged. One commented that ‘some treat it as big joke, time off school’. Some of the younger students commented that they found some of the activities boring. I return to this matter below, in discussing possible futures for the program in the school.

2. **Students’ understanding**

When they talked about the program most students focused on the games and other activities. When asked ‘what it was about’ even children in lower years were able to give clear and coherent descriptions of activities, their purposes and the ideas behind them, as well as of the relations between the activities and the ideas. Their responses
included words and phrases such as respect, helping, making people feel better, and taking care of other people.

Comments by members of the Year 4-5 group interviewed, concerning the session for the week I was in the school – on ‘special place’ - illustrate their understandings:

First student: ‘It's an imaginary place’
Interjection: ‘It doesn’t have to be imaginary’.
First student: ‘where you feel safe’.

‘You have to keep it in your heart... for when you’re upset or lonely’.
‘It’s about peacefulness... it helps you be calm’.

Such comments indicate that they have a good understanding of both the purpose of the program and of its content. This seems noteworthy, given that both teachers and peer leaders commented on how difficult some of the ideas are. Further, while most comments were about the more recent Peer Group lessons, some discussed or referred to ideas and activities from considerably earlier in the program.

Not surprisingly, the level of understanding was not uniform, but varied across ages, between individuals within the same age group, and in relation to different topics and activities. For several children, ‘special place’ translated into ‘a place you like;’ or ‘a really cool place’, which did not appear necessarily to capture the point of the exercise, as it was explained to me. One Peer Leader confessed that sometimes the ideas were so difficult that ‘even we don’t get it’. Another noted that ‘some activities are boring so they don’t want to remember it [the idea of the lesson]’ while another admitted that sometimes they didn’t get the activities completed in time to draw out the main issues the session was meant to address.

3. **Behaviour and relationships**

Teachers commented that they felt the program was already having a visible effect on student behaviour and relationships in the playground, and relates a number of incidents which they felt demonstrated this, including the following on the basketball court:

*The little kids were throwing hoops down one end and the big kids were managing to keep down the other end, or there are a couple of*
older ones showing the little ones. I was on duty and there was one little girl standing right in the middle, and I [called her to come off]. I turned around and starting to walk off expecting her to follow me. And I turned around and she was still standing there and I said “come on, come on”. And the bigger girls said to me “she’s been hit on the head”, as if to say “Don’t be so tough”... and that was that sort of caring protective behaviour that perhaps wouldn’t have been seen five years ago. That sort of cross-age behaviour... has come more and more since Peer Support’.

Peer Leaders were less confident that it had such an impact. One commented, with murmurs of agreement from others, that it really wasn’t cool to spend time with smaller children:

‘I don’t think the bigger kids like doing things with little kids – it’s a bit “kiddie”’.

They felt there was not much extension of the cross age relationships from Peer Group to the playground. Nevertheless, they, too, related stories of incidental contacts and conversations among children of different ages. From their comments it appears that the most ‘intense’ contacts are between Year 1 children and their Peer Leaders, with little ones approaching the Leaders and hugging them. The Leaders’ responses appeared ambivalent; they stated that this was ‘a bit too much’, yet, at the same time, my impression was that they felt pleased.

Another possible indicator that the program might be having an impact on student behaviour included comments by both teachers and students of varying ages that (apart from what one teacher described as ‘a few hardheads’) the bulk of behavioural difficulties, both in Peer Support Program and in the school more generally, arose with ‘new kids’. The clear implication was that those who had been there longer had absorbed the Peer Support Program ethos and had already softened their behaviour.

Apart from ‘behaviour’ in its usual relation to misbehaviour, there was another important sense in which it appeared the program was having an effect on the behaviour of Peer Leaders. Both in the Peer Group session I observed and in the

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briefing and debriefing session the leaders were working very hard to articulate and explain quite difficult concepts, and they were deeply engaged in the processes of reflection and self regulation the program appears calculated to foster. Moreover, their conduct as Leaders in their group sessions appear to reflect the values of the program: they were considerate, sought to resolve difficulties by discussion and request rather than by resort to authority or threat.

Further, the teachers interviewed all commented that there had been greater difficulties in the first year than in the second. In part, they attributed this to differences in characteristics of the two successive senior groups of students; in part they attributed it simply to the fact that this year’s leaders had the advantage of taking up their roles having already experienced the program. However, they also considered that the longer involvement in the program of this year’s leaders had already had an impact on them and their conduct.

4. Impact on responsibility, personal growth and sense of wellbeing

The Program stresses resilience, sense of self, connectedness, sense of possibility, responsibility, all of which relate to issues of personal growth and wellbeing. Such matters are by their nature difficult to measure. However, there were many references to such qualities in the interviews, especially with teachers; their comments and stories about incidents, and some of the students’ own comments provided signs that these were showing up in children. Further, while it is impossible to assess the extent to which the program might be contributing to any such changes, both the Principal and the teachers interviewed were confident that it was a significant factor.

Discussion of increased student responsibility focused on Leaders and Co leaders. One teacher commented in general terms that Leaders and Co leaders take their roles ‘very seriously’, while others told stories about the work they did in preparing and the seriousness with which they led their group sessions. These comments were borne out in Leaders’ comments about their preparation for sessions; from their descriptions of what they did, it was clear that several of them, at least, put considerable time, energy and care into it. Their discussions also revealed the thoughtfulness with which they approached the challenges of group leadership, and in my observation of their actual work in their groups.
As a sign of their determination to fulfil their Peer Support Program responsibilities, one teacher referred to the way they ‘battle it out even when it’s difficult’:

‘a lot feel they have to carry on regardless without having to seek help.’

One teacher saw student’s own suggestions and attempts to solve the issues first, as really important:

‘They are reluctant to call for help... It puts them under enormous pressure but calls forth all their problem solving initiative’.

Teachers’ ‘non interventionist’ approach to Peer Groups sessions indicated that they were quite prepared to trust Leaders to take responsibility, and from my observation as well as teachers’ comments, Leaders fulfilled this expectation well. As one teacher put it, Leaders are ‘prepared to do that bit more, go that bit further’.

There were also some indications that other students were informally taking on leadership roles within the program. One Leader, for example, noted that one of the Year 6 students in her group ‘kind of acts like the Co-leader coz the real Co-leader doesn’t really act like one’. (This comment of course, also testifies to the uneven-ness with which the formal leaders fulfil their responsibilities.)

Despite claims that Leaders were expected to exercise leadership within the school more generally, outside the Peer Support Program itself, neither teachers nor students made more than the most passing or incidental references to examples of such leadership. However, one sign of how their Peer Leader role might be translating into a more general role modelling might be found in the comments of younger students, who described them as ‘good’ and ‘cool’; equally significantly, perhaps several of them clearly aspired to be Peer Leaders when they reached Years 6 and 7 themselves.

Evidence for the impact of the program on personal growth and wellbeing took two main forms. First, inferring personal change underlying changes in behaviour. Thus, stories such as that cited already in which children were seen to display ‘caring protective behaviour’ are seen as signs of underlying attitudes and dispositions to be caring people. Second, interpreting children’s manner, attitudes and expressions of confidence. Thus, teachers refer to students ‘seeming more confident’ or ‘being more confident’. Such ‘evidence’ for the impact of the program is very ‘soft’ and points to the importance of finding stronger ways of assessing the program’s impact. Whatever

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the limitations of this evidence, it pointed to significant signs that the program might be having some effect in these areas.

Discussions of Leaders and Co-leaders also provided evidence of personal growth, reflected in increasing confidence in exercising their leadership within the Program. Another key sign of growth in Leaders was their capacity to deal constructively with situations and to take a mature approach to leadership. There were few signs or reports of bossiness by leaders, a clear indication of their adoption of a constructive leadership rather than an authoritarian model of leadership.

Senior students’ comments about what they found valuable about being Leaders also reflect a level of maturity I found surprising: ‘helping’, ‘doing stuff with little kids’; and ‘seeing people become friends with other people’. Several commented on their changed perceptions of teachers and appreciation of the difficulties teachers face: ‘you get to see what it’s like to be a teacher, like a teacher aide’; ‘see things from a teachers’ point of view’. Teachers commented on the significance of these latter comments:

‘It’s good for the leaders and support leaders - especially those who tend to be a bit feisty themselves - having to deal with the discipline involved... to be in the teachers’ shoes... It’s an important learning lesson for those kids’.

Some of these were ‘attention seekers’, and the process of inducting them into leadership was ‘an uphill battle’; but teachers claimed that even (especially?) with these children ‘we could see amazing progress’ and there was ‘a major growth in confidence’.

Another sign of personal growth is the development of constructive approaches to, and skills in, solving problems. Leaders talked about a range of strategies they use to address problems within their groups, in particular problems of disruptive behaviour and disengagement from the activities, and their contributions to the briefing/debriefing sessions revealed more: rewards (what one candidly described as ‘bribes’) to get cooperation, consequence cards, time outs, and a variety of modifications of the scripted program to make sessions more appealing, making it ‘a bit less strict’. One explained that ‘sometimes I do the dull stuff first and save the best till last’, and another added, ‘if you finish early you can play a game’. Within the scripted program they talked about, and I observed, the pairing of students for various activities and purposes.
Teachers commented on personal organisation and self management as aspects of personal growth, and saw this evident among Leaders in ‘their increased levels of self organisation… [making] a major contribution to [their] preparation for high school’. And they cited examples of children who were not expected to step up, including one particular student who struggled with normal classroom learning activities but who had ‘grown’ into being an excellent leader. More generally, and especially in relation to younger children teachers commented that they saw them ‘blossoming’ and ‘shining’ through the program.

There are clearly exceptions, of course, to these success stories; I have noted already that some lost their leadership positions, Leaders commented that some Co-leaders ‘don’t do it effectively’, and one Year 4-5 student talked about one who ‘walks around like she’s top dog’. Overall, however, it appears that many students, but senior students in particular, have shown significant personal growth through the Program.

‘Resilience’ and ‘a sense of wellbeing’ are difficult to pin down or demonstrate; however, it is not so difficult to show examples of the contexts and conditions that might be expected to promote these, and to relate these to the Peer Support program. Thus, for example, a teacher related an interaction she had noticed in the ‘special place’ session:

‘*When the leader asked “what did you see in your head”, one little boy answered, “I saw black”.*

Even though this was hardly a sign of a sense of wellbeing, the teacher saw it as an important opportunity to for this child who, she noted, was having ‘a really hard time’ to express such feelings.

‘*We have a program that allows kids to say that and the leader was there with him explaining to him...*’

More generally, as another teacher put it,

‘*You’ve got that care factor with the older children and the younger children working together*’

This is facilitated by the fact that Leaders ‘don’t use stand over tactics’ but are encouraged to take - and are inducted into – a more explanatory, sharing, communicative approach to their groups. Teachers described Peer Leaders as begin especially helpful in dealing with children who were shy, ‘little’, isolated or new to the school.
Drawings in one Year 1 child’s Peer Support Program notebook seemed indicative of the impact of the program on that child’s sense of wellbeing: the picture on the cover, drawn before the commencement of the program, showed figures with flat or jagged, unsmiling mouths. Every figure inside the book, in the pictures drawn following weekly peer group session was wearing a smile. Further, the picture following the session on ‘respect’ (and headed with the teacher’s translation of the ‘message’) showed figures holding hands, linking respect to another of the program’s themes: connectedness.

Leaders themselves displayed some scepticism about the impact of the program on students, their capacity to use it to give them greater self control, resilience and so on. In interviews following the ‘special place’ activity, and after they had explained what the exercise was about (‘It gives them a safe place to go to when they’re angry or upset’) I asked whether they thought members of their groups would make use of their own special places later. Three replied, one after another:

‘Some might. Some don’t really think much at all. Most of them just get angry and that’.

‘It could be helpful, but I don’t see them doing it’.

‘They won’t, because they don’t find it interesting. They think it’s a bit silly’.

5. Values

Much of the foregoing discussion testifies to the role of the program in teaching about, and cultivating values endorsed in the National Values Framework. Values that appear explicit in the program include: Care and compassion, Respect, Responsibility and Understanding Tolerance and Inclusion. It can also be argued that the remaining five values are implicit in the Peer Support program and process.

Both the Principal and the teachers interviewed were clearly aware of the National Values Framework, and equally clearly endorsed the values it enshrined. They saw connections between those values, their teaching, and the Peer Support Program. As noted already the program is further tied to the National Values Framework through its relation to the Behaviour Management Plan, which was reviewed explicitly in light of the Values Framework.
The convergence of the National Values Framework and Peer Support Program was clear in many of the comments teachers made about Peer Support as it operates in the school; their descriptions of its goals and effects included, respect, connectedness, responsibility, tolerance and fairness. Students, too, used the same or similar terms: most of these terms, respect, responsibility, tolerance, peacefulness and kindness in describing what they thought the program taught them. They demonstrated their understanding by the ways they ‘translated’ the terms more concretely – ‘helping people’, ‘being kind to people’, ‘looking after people when they’re sad/lonely’, ‘taking care of other people’, ‘being able to cooperate with your friends – and with people who aren’t your friends, too’.

It is important that such values not remain simply as words but be translated into attitudes and practices. Whether or not they can be attributed to the Peer Support Program or not, some of the behaviours noted above are signs that the values endorsed by the National Framework are finding their way into the behaviour of many of the children in this school.

**Difficulties**

Identifying more problematic areas of the program is clearly important when considering possible futures for the program in the school. Teachers, Leaders and other students commented on a range of difficulties that arose in the program. A number of these have been touched on in discussing the program and its impact above. Key areas of difficulty appear to be:

- The concepts are often difficult, even for senior students; this has flow on problems for younger students in Peer Group lessons.
- A number of the students find many of the activities unengaging.
- Leaders find the strict scripting problematic. As noted, some of them take the initiative to interpret the script in their own words, or depart from strict adherence from the order of proceedings outlined in the script. Leaders themselves felt that one of the weaknesses of the program in the previous year was that the presentation of sessions had been rather stilted, and that their decision to ‘put it in our own words’ had been a marked improvement.
potential downsides of this are (i) some ‘corruption’ of the message and (ii) not necessarily getting past the activity to draw out the message.

- Leaders, teachers and younger students all commented on recurrent problems in behaviour management in the Peer Group sessions. These were evident to me in my observations, and they were a major theme in the briefing and debriefing that I observed.

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

There were clear indications on the part of the Principal that he saw Peer Support as an ongoing part of the school, and that he saw this as tightly integrated with a range of other aspects of its program. There were also indications that he and others had already taken initiatives to review in relation to the preparatory ‘mapping’ exercise that preceded this case study. Further development of the program is also signalled in the *Annual Report to Parents*. Given that, a number of issues appear worth considering.

The first issue is essentially procedural, and concerns the evidential base for continuing to implement the program. In planning it would be useful to have evidence of:

1. the views of all teaching staff; the views of the three classroom teachers interviewed for this case study, while useful, are not necessarily indicative of those not interviewed, and, indeed, it seems at least possible that those who self-selected to be interviewed would represent those most supportive of the program; and

2. the impact on behaviour, as discussed on pp. 13-14 above. This might usefully relate not only to misbehaviour but to positive behaviours across the full range of contexts in which it is hoped the program might make an impact.

The second, is whether and in what ways the Peer Support Program might become more integrated into &/or central to the school’s ethos and operations. If it is to become more integrated/central to the life of the school operations, then there are at least four areas that might be considered:

1. **Staff involvement**

   a. Teacher involvement in the program. The role for teachers in the program and in support of Peer Leaders could be further explored. One teacher suggested
that she would like opportunities to observe briefing/debriefing sessions as a way of enhancing her knowledge of the program and her capacity to provide appropriate support for leaders conducting sessions in her classroom.

b. Staff training. It is noted that few staff have had opportunity to participate in *Peer Support Foundation* training. The school might consider the potential benefits of such training for enhancing knowledge of the program and its underlying philosophy as a step towards more informed development of the program, and towards empowering teachers to take more ownership of the process of integrating the program into their own classroom practice.

2. *Program content and ‘regular’ curriculum*

   It is clear that there are actual and potential links and overlaps between *Peer Support Program*, the ‘regular’ curriculum and the *National Values Framework*. Equally, it is clear that there has not yet been any sustained or whole staff attempt to systematically explore and develop such potentials. Developing such links would appear to offer the school one way of enhancing cross-curricular integration, and of developing a common language for developing positive social behaviour and addressing problem behaviours.

3. *Maintaining student engagement*

   a. Peer Leaders and co-leaders emphasised their ongoing needs for developing skills of group management; their concerns in this area were underscored by the number of times they referred to this in both briefing/debriefing and in interviews. Periodic refresher sessions, apart from the weekly briefing/debriefing sessions might be beneficial.

   b. My observation indicated that the physical layout of the classrooms made effective conduct of sessions more difficult; there was lack of adequate space for the group activity I observed and the close proximity of groups meant that members of one group could hear, and potentially be distracted by what was happening in the other.

   c. Maintaining interest in the group activities was also important, with several students at all year levels commenting that some activities were boring. Others noted that some of the concepts were difficult – for leaders to explain, and group members to grasp. Two of the teachers interviewed suggested that better classroom preparation of students for some of the exercises, and more
explicit and extensive links the ‘translation’ of some of the concepts into ‘easier’ language undertaken by one of the teachers, and other moves to incorporate program content appear to be useful steps in this direction. Evaluation mechanisms might be useful to both teachers and Peer Leaders in addressing these issues.

4. **Visibility**

If the school were to pursue the development of the *Peer Support Program* and give it more central integrating role in the school more generally there might be significant advantages in making the program more visible. At present, it is featured in the school *Newsletter* and in the annual *Report to Parents*, both important means of communicating with the wider school community. These documents provide details of activities in the program, and the function of the program in enhancing school climate, respectively, but neither provides an adequate basis for parents to know about and understand the program, how it works and the benefits that might flow from it. If the program were more integrated, especially with the KLA curriculum, parents might be enabled to appreciate its ‘core’ value in learning as well as its more invisible, long term and less market-related value.

**Summary, conclusions and recommendations**

The program has been in operation for two years, on a whole school basis, at the initiative of teachers. It appears to be seen as meeting a range of needs in the school’s attempt to support the learning and wellbeing of students as well as in relation to behaviour management. Students interviewed appeared to have a good grasp of the content and intent of the program, and expressed largely positive feelings about it, although there were some mixed feelings, and students of all ages identified aspects of the program that they found less enjoyable or more difficult. Peer Leaders conduct their groups largely without intervention; while they are prepared for each session by a briefing which carefully leads them through the program’s script, they appear to exercise a degree of initiative in shaping the sessions. They report a number of difficulties especially with group behaviour management; with the support of the coordinator through the briefing and debriefing sessions, they appear to have developed a number of strategies for dealing with this. Strategies, and their demonstrated behaviour in sessions, are strong on praise
and encouragement, in keeping with the program itself, but include separating problem groupings, rewards and ‘bribes’, and ‘time out’.

The overwhelming indications were that the program was well supported, and largely successful in contributing to improvements in the climate of the school. The Principal indicated a strong commitment to sustaining the program and, indeed, further developing it both in itself, and in relation to other aspects of the school’s program.

Given this, the principal recommendations to emerge from this review of the program are:

1. ascertain the views of staff not interviewed as part of this case study; this might include both their general attitudes towards the program, and any concerns or suggestions for improvement they might have;
2. identify desired and potential outcomes and develop and implement data collection strategies to demonstrate outcomes
3. discuss and resolve issues identified in ‘challenges’ above.

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