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

“Peer support is like a key to unlock qualities
that you never thought you’d have for your life”
(Interview: Peer Support Leader)
School Background and Context

Townsville West State School is situated in one of Townsville’s oldest suburbs, a small inner suburban pocket nestled at the foot of Castle Hill, surrounded by a mix of older style housing and business premises and enclosed by some of Townsville’s major arterial roads and northern rail line. The school has a history spanning almost 120 years. Current enrolment is 110 primary students, with 12 additional students in the Special Education Unit and a small number of (>10) preschool students. The school population is of mixed but predominately Anglo-Celtic heritage, but with around 18% of its students identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders. A 2004 audit of families represented in the school indicated a mix of high transience combined with a significant number of families with a long history in the locality, and significant numbers of single parent and low income families. Although the Principal stressed that the data from that audit should be treated with caution, at a general level, the picture these data paint seems plausible.

The school is characterised by a relatively stable staff, although there has been high turnover of school Principals; the present Principal has been in the school since the commencement of the 2005 school year. The school website lists teaching staff as the Principal and 5 other (Primary) classroom teachers, a Preschool teacher and a learning support teacher; three Special Education Unit staff; there are also other visiting staff, including music and behaviour management specialists and a number of Teacher Aides.

The school motto – “Striving to Excel” – reflects the values of working hard and achievement of excellence. Yet, as with many small schools with a high proportion of lower SES and Indigenous families, achieving high academic achievement levels is problematic.

While the school mission statement recognises intellectual achievement as a primary responsibility, it also addresses other dimensions of students’ growth:
TWSS aims to provide a comprehensive education of the highest quality, developing intellectual, social, emotional, physical, cultural and creative potential in every child.

The School Creed, as cited in the School Planning Overview, 2003-2005 invokes concepts of peace, contentment, love and the recognition of difference, especially through the integration of students with special needs into the life of the school; the 2006-2008 Planning Overview adds resilience to this list. The school website, on the page discussing ‘school climate’ states that:

*The school values the 5 “Cs” – Courtesy, Common Sense, Co-operation, Caring and Consideration, and these values form a solid base for children to learn how to interact with their peers and teachers.*

In fulfilling the goals signalled in these various statements, the school faces the challenges inherent in any small school, including the lack of economies of scale in providing resources, and the potential impact of even small turnovers in staff and families, offset by a sense of community. The core of families with long term affiliations with the school, and the number of students with relatives in the school appear to give the notion of a ‘school community’ real substance, with implications for both the ‘tone’ of the school in general, and the Peer Support Program in particular. Without wishing to romanticise the school, or ignore the tensions and conflicts inevitable within any community, it appeared to me as an outsider visiting the school to be a pleasant and friendly place. I observed many interactions among staff, among students, and between staff and students, that appeared open and warm, and felt welcomed into the school by staff and students alike. This impression accords well with comments by staff I interviewed who described the school in very positive terms. The School Opinion Survey data for 2004 indicate that around 90% of parents and students rated Townsville West as ‘a good school’, including highly positive responses from Indigenous parents and children.

The Triennial School Review demonstrates a strong commitment to collaboration with surrounding state schools. Various documents including the Triennial Review and the
School Planning Overviews for both the 2003-2005 and 2006-2008 triennia signal professional development through the TEACH cluster (including PD focused on Peer Support Program) as priorities. They also identify collaborative signal curriculum development both with the cluster schools and across years groups within the school as important areas of development. Forecast areas of curriculum development include collaborative planning and the development of shared philosophies across year levels and integration of curricula across KLAs. I return to these issues below, when considering possible futures for the Peer Support Program within the school.

Case Study Data

The case study was completed using a range of data to document the program and evaluate its impact. Interviews were conducted with the Principal, all 5 of the classroom teachers including the Year 6-7 coordinating teacher, one of the SEU teachers and a teacher aide. Three student focus group interviews were conducted, with 4 or 5 students in each. Three pairs of peer support groups were observed for part of one Peer Support lesson; the Peer Leader briefing and debriefing 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

The School Website (www.townwestss.eq.edu.au) was also examined.

Peer Support Program overview

Introduction and rationale
The Peer Support program was introduced in 2004 following conversations between with the visiting Behaviour Management teacher, the Principal and a Year 7 teacher. On her arrival, the new Principal, who had already experienced the Peer Support program in her previous (secondary) school, recognised that there was strong staff support for the program and decided to continue with it. One of the teachers – the teacher responsible for the program in 2004 – had received formal training through the Peer Support Foundation. However, as she was no longer teaching the senior class in 2005, responsibility devolved onto the new Year 6-7 class teacher. The new coordinating teacher had no previous experience and no formal training with the program; she runs the program with support from the previous co-ordinating teacher, and the Principal, with whom she shares teaching of the Year 6-7 class.

The Peer Support program now appears as one of a range of initiatives beyond the core KLA teaching program and the formal Behaviour Management strategy – a positive, pro-active and pre-emptive student centred approach to cultivating a supportive school environment for learning. While Peer Support Program is often spoken of in relation to behaviour management, it is noteworthy that on the school’s website it appears in the ‘Information for Parents’ section on the ‘Curriculum’ page under the heading of ‘our school curriculum’, and on the ‘School Climate’ page in terms which focus on its contribution to personal development:

*The school also operates a Peer Support program which provides the children with opportunities to develop skills for life, including those related to coping with difficult situations, resilience, effective communication, risk-taking and conflict resolution.*

Teachers interviewed expressed enthusiastic support for the program for its contribution to developing better relationships, understanding of and tolerance for others, self awareness, emotional and social wellbeing, skills for coping with conflict, and the cultivation of leadership and responsibility especially among the older students in the school. It appears that the decision to continue the program in 2005 reflected both the
Principal’s prior experience of the program, and staff members’ belief, based on their 2004 experience, that it had a valuable contribution to make to the life of the school. Their support for the Program appears to accord with the views they expressed in a 2004 survey conducted as part of the school Behaviour Management Review, where a substantial minority of staff felt children did not receive sufficient skilling in maintaining good behaviour, and all staff supported the development of strategies that encouraged students to take responsibility for their own behaviour.

*General organisation of the program within the school*

A significant feature of the program as it has run during 2005 is that it has been restricted to one five week unit during Term 3, rather than on an ongoing weekly basis across most of the year. The Co-ordinating teacher explained that this had allowed her time to prepare without undue pressure, and the program to run in the term with least pressure from other activities. The Principal explained her rationale in terms of keeping the program fresh and minimising the likelihood that staff and students would allow it to become simply a ‘dull routine’. The unit was carefully selected to address a perceived significant need within the school: the quality of intra- and inter-personal relationships.

The program is organised largely as per the *Peer Support Foundation’s* guidelines, with a designated coordinator (Year 6-7 teacher). The Principal, who shares teaching of the Year 6-7 class shares parts of the co-ordinator’s roles. There is a designated half hour lesson for all students in the school per week. Year 6 and 7 students (Peer Leaders and Co-leaders) lead this half hour session, following a preparation session with their teacher. Each Peer Leader and Co-leader pair works with a group of students from all year levels, including students from the Special Education Unit, but excluding students from the associated Pre-School, who are not in attendance on the day Peer Support Groups are conducted. These sessions are held in classrooms, with two groups in each room, under the general supervision of teachers. Staff from the SEU also attend to assist, where necessary, with students from the Unit. Following the session, Leaders and Co-leaders attend a de-briefing session with the coordinator; the Principal played a significant part in
the debriefing session I observed. Other students return to their own classrooms for a
debrief with their own teachers.

Leaders and Co-Leaders were prepared for their role in a 2-day workshop held away from
their school near the beginning of Term 1. This workshop was led by the Principal of one
of the other TEACH cluster schools, who has been a key advocate and prime mover of
the Peer Leader program in the cluster. The program included a range of activities to
prepare students for their leadership role, including self-awareness and group facilitation
activities. In the absence of prior experience or training on the part of the Year 6-7
teacher-coordinator, this workshop functioned as in-service preparation, and the teacher
herself indicated that this had proved extremely valuable, providing crucial knowledge
and understanding of the program.

Before commencement of the Program in Term 3, the teacher prepared the materials for
the whole unit, organised into folders for each Leader and Co-leader. Teachers were
provided with an overview of the unit. The complete materials for each leader for the
whole unit are stored in a ‘Unit’ folder, while materials for each week are temporarily
kept in a separate folder for each leader. While the school does not provide a dedicated
filing cabinet for Peer Support Program materials, this was felt by those involved not to
be a problem.

The program is not specifically budgeted for. There are, consequently, no specific
calculations of requirements or their cost implications in terms of either direct monetary
costs or staff time. Funds are drawn from the school’s Curriculum cost centre, on
essentially the same basis as other programs, including the KLAs. Direct costs to date had
included photocopying of weekly program activity materials, and costs associated with
attendance by student and staff attendance at Peer Leader activities outside the school
(including TRS costs to cover absent staff). The program is supported with teacher aide
time for such things as copying the required materials. The teacher/coordinator does not
receive any additional non-contact time to coordinate the program. No one involved in
the program indicated that the program had encountered resourcing problems or that it
was under resourced, although it was clear from the comments of some staff that the co-
ordinator’s role was quite demanding of the teacher’s time and effort in setting up the
program. While no staff member has undergone the teacher training recommended and
provided by the Peer Support Foundation during 2005, the Principal expressed a clear
vision that over time the school would work towards Peer Support Foundation training
for all staff members as an integral and prioritised component of its overall Professional
Development program.

Detailed conduct of weekly sessions

The cycle of activities that comprise the Program begins with the Briefing session with
Leaders and Co-leaders, conducted by the Year 6-7 teacher the day prior to the Peer
Group sessions. One important function of the briefing is to assist students to prepare the
specific materials for the lesson. Peer Leaders and Co-leaders interviewed indicated that
some sessions required some additional preparation at home, although they indicated that
this was not onerous or time consuming. Peer Leaders informed me that they visit junior
classes ahead of the session to advise students what they need to bring with them; it was
not clear whether they did this regularly or occasionally. The other apparent function of
the briefing session is to discuss teaching and behaviour management strategies; Leaders
and Co-leaders were unanimous about the value of these briefings in helping them
develop strategies for behaviour management. Teachers and Leaders both commented
that in the first year, and the first sessions of 2005, students underestimated the difficulty
of their task, and were under-prepared; they also note that since the initial session, and
the critical reflection that followed, the Leaders have developed a more realistic
appreciation of how to conduct the sessions, and are better prepared.

Peer group sessions are timetabled for Thursday afternoons. This arrangement was
determined in order that the program should intrude only minimally on core KLA learning.
Peer Group Program sessions are preceded by a short school assembly at which the
Principal introduces the ideas and theme for the session, then directs students, group by
group to the classrooms. Leaders commented that ‘there’s hardly any pushing and shoving’
as students arrive at and leave classrooms for peer group sessions. In 2004, the program had been scheduled in the morning. Some teachers who had experienced the program in that year described that arrangement as producing a ‘mad scramble’ to finish teaching and pack the students off and contrasted it unfavourably with the present arrangement.

Within the session, the Leaders and Co-leaders organise the other students and work through the activities broadly following the script as per their briefing. In addition to explaining and leading students through the activities, they deal with matters of classroom management, including, in the session I observed, both the movement from floor to desks and from individual work to whole group activity, and any issues of misbehaviour. Teachers commented that in 2004 and in the first session for 2005, they simply read the script, determined to follow it to the letter. Subsequently, they appear to have taken more ownership of the sessions; they explained how they put it into their own words, make decisions about timing, and introduced a system of small individual rewards. A teacher related how on one occasion the Leaders of one group modified the session to allow the group to play a game ‘because they’d worked so hard’.

Within sessions, teachers take a ‘hands off’ approach, but one in which they are attentive to what is happening. The coordinating teacher described their role thus:

> It’s ‘hands off’, but in a sense the teachers can’t just sit at the back and do their marking. The kids know that I’m listening, that I’m aware of what’s going on. But there’s no ‘over their shoulder’ watching what’s going on.

Another explained that,

> I keep an ear open to see nothing horrific is happening, otherwise, I just keep out of it. I would intervene if they asked me to, but that hasn’t happened. I’d step in anyway if I thought I needed to, but that’s only happened a few times’.
SEU staff – both classroom teachers and teacher aides – are present ‘in the background’ to intervene or support the special needs students where necessary. The Principal also moves around the school keeping an eye on proceedings.

Following the session, Leaders and Co-leaders gather with the coordinating teacher and Principal for a debriefing, while other students return to their classrooms for a debriefing with their teachers. This debriefing session occupies the remaining time before end of school dismissal – around 15 minutes. The Leader/Co-leader debrief involves a critical reflective review of the session. It focuses strongly on the positive aspects of the sessions, but identifies problems and staff and students explore possible strategies for dealing with such problems in future sessions. Classroom teachers explained that their debriefing of their own classes involves asking children to explain what they did and what it was about, identifying and reinforcing the key theme and ideas.

Apart from the debriefing, the Principal also follows up sessions by raising the issues explored in each session at the following school assembly. And the coordinator also receives feedback from other staff. Initially, teachers were asked to complete formal evaluation and feedback sheets, following Peer Support Program guidelines, but this was felt to be too unwieldy, and it was considered that in the context of such a small staff, informal feedback would be more effective.

**Peer support program–impact so far**

**Quantitative data**

The Principal was at pains to point out, correctly, that it would be difficult to provide data which could provide any meaningful quantitative measure of the impact of the Peer Support Program, given that it had run only for 5 weeks in 2005 and, in what many of those interviewed agreed was a less than satisfactory fashion, in 2004. The most striking measure of behavioural change in the school since 2004 had been a dramatic drop in suspensions, but the extent to which this could be attributed to the Peer Support Program was minimised by other factors, including a change in Principal, what the Principal

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herself identified as the disproportionate impact of the loss of even a small number of troublesome students from the small school population, and the short time the program had been running effectively.

It will be important, in assessing the ongoing and medium to long term impact of the program as it continues, to recurrently monitor both school opinion survey data and the behaviour management register. While it should be noted that even with such data, it will not be possible to “quarantine” the impact of Peer Support and to factor out the effect of changes in staffing, curriculum and school population, such data over time will provide some indication of shifts since the introduction of the Peer Support Program.

**Qualitative data**

**Indications of Support**

Interview data revealed wide-spread and generally strong support for the program from staff and students alike. Teachers considered that students, on the whole, enjoy the program. Teacher of the younger grades, for example, made comments such as:

*The little ones talk about Thursday as ‘Peer Support Day’ and get very excited about it. It’s a big thing in their minds.*

*My own class love it. They ask about it, ‘Are we going to Peer Support today?’*

*They come in on Thursdays and it’s all ‘Peer Support, Peer Support…’, and they’ve got their things all ready.*

One of the teachers of the older students stated that children in her class ‘are really thrilled with the program’. One of the staff from the SEU said of children from the unit, ‘the little ones don’t comprehend much of it, but the bigger ones feel rather important being up there amongst the others’. And the co-ordinating teacher commented, ‘I walked around on the last activity, and they were all looking happy’.
Teachers also commented positively on the program itself, as distinct from the students’ responses to it. One teacher said, simply, ‘It’s fabulous’. Those involved in the SEU indicated that they saw it as a valuable and worthwhile program for students in their unit. Another staff member commented that ‘the overall benefits far outweigh any other factors’. The benefits this and other staff members referred to included the development of a common language for dealing with social, behavioural and relationship issues, and promoting greater interaction and understanding among students, including students of different ages, backgrounds and abilities.

Students interviewed all said they enjoyed the program:

- *It’s really fun because you get to draw pictures and learn lots of new stuff.*
- *It’s enjoyable because we get to interact with different age children and get to know children from different classes and don’t have to know just people from our own classes.*

However, they felt that a fair sprinkling of their peers were less enthusiastic, enjoyed it less, and sustained what might best be described as an undercurrent of resistance and disengagement. One Year 3 student illustrated this point with a comment about another student in her group. She explained that, when asked for a solution to a problem under discussion in the group session,

- *He’d put up his hand and give a solution, but it’s not a real solution.*

Another, of similar age, said in a different focus group,

- *I think people in my peer support group think it’s really just a waste of time cos all they really do is just muck around and say jokes and things.*

**Salience within the overall school program**

The Principal explained that the program was an integral but not central part of an overall strategy for Behaviour Management, but where Behaviour Management was seen as connected to, rather than disconnected from, the teaching and learning work that constitute the core of the school’s mission. While the Principal was careful not to
overstress the significance or functional role of the program in the school, there were several indicators of ways it did spill over into other aspects of the school life.

The program is highly visible in School Newsletters, one of which devoted considerable space to Peer Support, including photographs showing the program in action. It seems likely, from the interviews, that this visibility is enhanced by students, especially Leaders and Co-leaders, talking about Peer Support at home.

Peer Support is also presented in various school documents as having an integral role in the school’s broad social curriculum, as noted earlier. It is noteworthy, here, that it is positioned as part of curriculum, not as a co-curricular activity. Further, some teachers interviewed clearly positioned Peer Support as part of the curriculum, noting that they regarded work done there as work they need not repeat, especially in relation to HPE (the human relations component) and SOSE (aspects of social relations, and values such as inclusiveness). Apart from the short debriefing following Peer Support sessions, in which they asked students to explain what they had done and what they had learned in the preceding session, teachers described a variety of ways in which they referred to or drew on the content of Peer Support sessions in dealing with social and behavioural issues within the classroom and playground.

Finally, one teacher explained that peer groups would be used as a way of organising students in an upcoming outdoor excursion.

Two other things appear to reinforce and enhance the salience and status of the program within the school. First, the Principal’s active support and involvement. As one teacher commented, on the importance

_of Helen being not just in her office... She sees how it’s going. Kids see her being interested and think, ‘Well, it must be important. We mean business’._

Second, the fact that Peer Support effectively occupies one whole school afternoon each week while it is in operation. The same teacher commented:
It’s same thing with the pre-session meeting. The whole thing is better organised, and it lets everyone know, ‘This is important. It matters’.

I return to the issue of the salience of the Program within the school below, in considering possible futures for the Peer Support Program within the school.

**Relationships, Behaviour, Leadership and Responsibility**

A second dimension of comments about the impact of the program concerned matters of behaviour, relationships, and, especially in relation to the Year 6 and 7 cohorts, leadership and responsibility. Of these, relationships and leadership attracted the most comment; responsibility arose in the context of leadership and, surprisingly, given that Peer Support Program is readily seen as a behaviour management program, there were only isolated comments in passing concerning behaviour.

Teachers and students suggested that the program was having a positive impact on social relationships in the school. Within group sessions, they saw these relationships manifested in the ways students spoke to each other, and included each other in activities and discussions. This appears particularly marked in the case of students from the SEU. One staff member noted the growth in understanding of students with special needs through these interactions, and in my interviews there was evidence of a real recognition of the significance of what might on the surface appear to be quite minor interactions or responses. I observed one group where all students in the group reacted with evident pleasure to a special needs student who answered a particular question. In interviews, student displayed equal pride and pleasure when relating the same incident: ‘He’s never talked to us before’, they explained. While acknowledging that mainstream students in the school had always been tolerant of special needs students, one staff member commented that:

*The Peer Leaders handle the SEU kids really well – they’re really good, gentle, coaxing... Being in that role working with SEU kids brings them*
on... it's a wonderful learning experience for them. I think they're wonderful... Very encouraging.

Teachers, especially, saw these relations spilling over into the playground in what they perceived as increased interactions among children of different ages, and among mainstream and SEU students. These they saw as a flow-on effect of ‘the vertical grouping of ages’, which allowed students of different ages to get to know each other, and the positive integration of children from the regular classes and the SEU. Thus, for example:

- They [special needs students]’ll go and seek them out in the playground.
- Even for things like tying their shoelaces... They’re more comfortable around the bigger kids now.

Student accounts of relations outside the group sessions were more ambivalent. On the one hand, they affirmed that students did mix across age groups. One young student, for example, commented that:

- I play with my Leaders cos they’re in a higher age group and they’re, like, more mature.

Older students, however, were more cautious in admitting such fraternising:

- Do we mix? Yes... sometimes. We don’t play with them, cos they’re with their age group.

They also indicated that where such mixing occurred it was more likely to be initiated by younger students than themselves:

- They like us, come up and hug us, cos we greet them, treat them with respect, listen to them – especially the little ones, and the SEUs.

Another commented on their relationship with special needs students:

- We’ve taught the SEUs and others to be kind, and the SEUs, we speak to them. We invite them in when they’re crying and they look for us, and we hold their hand or something and they don’t swear at us.

While there appears to me to be a noticeable element of condescension alongside a justifiable pride in what they probably overestimate as their role in promoting good social relations in the school, there is a clear sense here of valuing, and wanting to be part of
good supportive relationships with others who are easily rejected as different, or with whom they would not normally mix.

The second prominent theme in comments on the impact of the program concerns the senior students’ leadership roles. Student comments focused about their leadership focused largely on their roles as group leaders and the procedures and activities through which they carried them out. Teachers offered more reflective comments on the ways different students had taken on leadership roles, including some who were considered quite unlikely to do so, or to do so well. One comment in particular captured a widely expressed view:

*Some leaders are ratbags themselves, and if you took out the group ratbag, they might become the ratbag themselves. But I’ve watched them over the weeks and I’m amazed at how they’ve grown. I can’t believe this is happening.*

Teachers and students contrasted the 2005 group of leaders favourably with their predecessors, and explained the difference in two ways. First, in terms of the more or less random differences between the two cohorts – this year’s class were simply ‘a better bunch of kids’. Second, in terms of this year’s leaders having a better understanding of what was involved on the basis of their prior experience. This itself points to a possible effect of the program over the longer term, and suggests a likely cumulative impact of sustaining the program over a number of years. It seems unlikely that the process of appointing leaders has played a critical role in ensuring that only ‘good kids’ become leaders, as it seems largely to be a process of self selection in which virtually all senior students become leaders. The coordinator explained that:

*We asked who wanted to be leaders. Then we picked and chose. There was only one who said he didn’t want to, but when it comes to it he’s good.*

Overall, teachers agreed that the leaders were doing a good job, and more than one commented on a student who had started badly as a leader, but had improved and ‘really gained from the experience’.
Teachers and Leaders both commented on their changing competence in exercising leadership. At the beginning (referring variously to 2004 and the first weeks of 2005), Leaders were ‘wooden’ and ‘inflexible’. One teacher explained (in relation to 2004):

*They didn’t know how to pace it, they were going from a script, so they couldn’t respond to elicit and cultivate understanding.*

She contrasted that to this year when:

*Kids know what they’re doing this year, they understand the purpose of the meeting.*

Others noted that Leaders were now ‘quite switched on’, even to behaviour issues. Leaders themselves agreed, and attributed the change on the one hand to their briefing sessions (in particular, the attention to matters of teaching and behaviour management), and to their own decision to take ownership of the material, put it into their own words and treat the sessions as *really* theirs to run.

Of equal importance, from both the interview data and my own observations, is the style of leadership. One teacher noted an initial tendency for Leaders to ‘turn into little Gestapos’. Both teachers and Leaders also commented on the rather authoritarian style of the previous leader group. They noted a rapid change in the ways the 2005 group had come to exercise their leadership role. One teacher noted that Leaders no longer sought to dominate or control their Co-leaders, but that the pairs worked as a leadership team; they ‘praise each other, turn to each other and build each other up’. With their group members there was a similar pattern:

*The first week, it was ‘I’m in charge, you’re doing it’. A bossy thing. They had trouble with control – it was all authoritative – ‘Sit down, do this’.*

After debriefing and much critical discussion and exploration of alternative strategies, they have developed a range of approaches with encouragement and incentives. Consequently, one teacher commented that:
Their development as leaders is quite cute... if they finish early they think up their own little games to play. And they talk about it: ‘Little Mary, she really needed my help today’.

My observation of both the peer groups session, and of older students’ responses to their younger peers in the focus group discussions suggested they are not only able to ‘talk the talk’ of the Program and its values, but that they are also ‘walking the walk’, and have taken on those values in at least some of their behaviour. On several occasions in the focus groups, for example, older students praised or affirmed the value of younger students’ comments. At other points they stopped themselves from speaking to make space for a younger peer to talk. Such behaviour manifests values such as respect and inclusiveness.

As noted above, in discussing relationships, Leaders occasionally talked about ways their leadership role extended beyond the Peer Group classroom session. As one summarised the point:

Younger kids turn to us for help, now, instead of the teachers.

A notable aspect of this transformation in Leaders is the evident shift in the way they talk about leadership in terms of helping and supporting, rather than in terms of exercising authority, power or control. Given the dominant models of leadership available in popular culture, and the value orientation of the Peer Leadership Program, it is difficult not to see their adoption of this socially constructive approach to leadership as at least partly a sign of the program’s impact on their thinking as well as their practice.

A sub theme within discussions of leadership concerned the ways leaders had taken on responsibilities as part of their role.

They looked at it as a big responsibility. We talked about it with them, and they took it on as this.

Such taking of responsibility ranged from relatively minor matters of looking through the session outline ahead of time, or carefully preparing their own notes so as to reduce their
dependence on the written script to taking on responsibility for helping younger students or students with special needs in the playground, as noted already in discussing relationships in the school. And, according to the coordinating teacher, for the most part, ‘they’ve taken on those responsibilities really well.’

**Learning about Self; Personal Growth**

Another area in which teachers and students talked about the program having an impact was students’ learning about the issues canvassed by the program (in particular, learnings about the self) and personal growth. Teachers identified ‘self-awareness, self knowledge’ as the key issues explored in the unit. Students of varying ages commented that they had learned about such issues or aspects of human nature and human relations as:

- *Things that help you be friends with others;*
- *Other people’s personalities and how you can hurt them in ways you didn’t mean to hurt them;*
- *Things that are different about us… and things in yourself other people might have and you might not.*

They identified peacefulness, respect, happiness, self esteem as key concepts underlying this content.

However, teachers, especially of younger classes, were doubtful about their grasp of the substance. Referring to the discussion in her classroom following the session in which they cut out figures, and identified the characteristics associated with them she explained:

*They were supposed to use the cut outs to illustrate characteristics, like ‘a memory like elephant’. But all their talk focused on elephants. Often they don’t make the connection from the activity to the concept – it’s too symbolic for them. They get quick messages, like ‘be nice’, but that’s about it for them.*

Another commented that:
When I ask them, ‘What did you do today, what did you learn today’, some really grasp it, others just parrot back what they’ve heard before – often the previous week.

 Teachers’ doubts seemed to be supported by many of the students’ comments. When asked what they learned, younger children, especially, talked about the activities, and references to the things they had learned through those activities were specific rather than general: ‘X has a good memory’ (rather than, say, ‘we all have valuable qualities’).

Nevertheless, one teacher in particular considered that the key thing students learned was not the specific content of any session, but what she described as:

*a common language for self understanding - a tool we can share in talking with them.*

Further, she said, because this developing common language was grounded in experiential learning, ‘kids do understand’.

While most of the comments above refer to learning about things, teachers and students also referred to what is better described as self-knowledge – knowledge that is appropriated as self understanding, intimately linked to a sense of ‘who I am’ and, consequentially, to behaviour. In this vein, students commented that they had learned to:

*interact with people without having to resort to bad language or push and shove, or get angry or go to violence... to talk it through.*

*be kind to them, be a friend and be nice to them, and caring, and if you don’t like a person and they’re going to annoy you, just being able to calm down.*

Similarly, they explained to me the notion of ‘qualities’ and the program’s identification of ‘quality of the week’, and talked about the quality as something they could apply in their own daily behaviour: as one put it, ‘you can use the quality on people at home’. One explicitly linked the program to his own growing sense of self understanding and self appreciation:

*Peer support is like a key to unlock qualities that you never though you’d have or be able to have for your life.*
While many of these comments talked about the impact on their own self awareness, there were also indications of a growth in empathetic understanding of others’ feelings in situations:

> Now we know how it feels like when we misbehave for teachers.

Arguably, it is these understandings that are most likely to inform the change in inclusive and supportive behaviour already noted in the playground – words they used to describe what they had learned applied equally to the ways I watched them relate to each other in focus group discussions: attentiveness, sensitivity and awareness of others.

Teachers saw similar outcomes:

> The benefits are clear – greater self esteem in the classroom.

In relation to the Leaders, she added,

> It’s something they think they’ve done really well. They feel really good about themselves and they do it.

Another commented:

> They’ve really grown in themselves.

Some student comments constituted evidence not only of their personal growth but of their growing acquisition of a language for self understanding; as one student said,

> We’ve got more self esteem. We’ve learned things that are positive about ourselves. Things that are good about ourselves.

**Values**

Teachers expressed no doubt that Peer Support Program taught values. One explained:

> A lot of it is done in the program through the key qualities. It’s tied in quite well.

The Principal, too, noted that values were ‘very explicit in the sessions we did’.

Staff identified such things as respect, how you show you’re a friend, tolerance, fair go, valuing other people, empathy, responsibility and trust as values taught in the program. Students referred to many of the ‘qualities’ (Peer Support terminology) that are included
in the *National Values Framework* – respect, tolerance, caring, looking after ourselves, self esteem, friendship, helping, peacefulness and kindness.

While recognising the role of Peer Support Program in teaching these values, staff insisted that such values were, and always had been, an integral part of ordinary, routine teaching:

> You can’t rely just on Peer Support to do that. It’s something we’re doing all the time, 5 times a day every day: ‘Are you being fair, are you being honest?’

Another commented:

> Values – I don’t believe any of it’s new... if you’re not doing it you’re not doing your job. The whole philosophy of a teacher is based on values... you establish that from the start, and that’s the basis of your behaviour management.

In particular, values underpinned and were routinely made explicit in behaviour management or, more broadly, in helping students to work better together. As the Principal explained,

> The school overall is heavy on values – the ‘5 Cs’. Expectations of behaviour in class, how teachers counsel children who’ve been naughty – there’s an ongoing dialogue with kids on how to treat others.

Equally importantly, values are not only explicit but ‘embedded in the unit’; as one put it, ‘care and compassion are built in’. Another explained how this worked through the fundamental principle of multi-age groupings: ‘valuing other people of different ages is a value, isn’t it’. Teachers of junior grades pointed out that the embedded experiential nature of values education through the program and more generally was especially important for younger children, for whom formal statements about values were likely to be too abstract and difficult to relate to practice.

The naturalness of this multi-faceted approach to values education and an indication of how seamlessly Peer Support fits within, and contributes to the impact of the school in teachers’ work and children’s developing values was illustrated in the following comment made by one teacher:
I was just chatting to a little child today in trouble. And I thought, ‘This is where connectedness comes in’. And talking with him I realised I was using all these terms - being honest, being fair – all the values. And I thought, ‘Yes, we use these terms, we talk with them about it’.

Teachers also noted the importance of children not just taking on values as words they could speak, but ‘becoming automatic, like they automatically think those things and do them’. Some of the interviews provided evidence that in fact students were taking on such values at the level of behaviour. As one teacher commented:

*a lot of the peer support takes place out in the playground – sitting together, talking together, picking up someone else’s rubbish isn’t a problem.*

Further, as I have noted already, the way older students in the mixed-age focus group interviews made space for their younger fellow students, encouraged them to speak and showed respect for what they had to say. While they occasionally sounded a little condescending, it appeared that they were carrying out the ways they had learned, in part in the Peer Support Program.

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

The key issue concerning the future development and place of Peer Support in the school arising from both the schools’ documentation and the interview data concerns the place of Peer Support within the whole school program. It was clear that the Program already enjoyed a significant place, was valued and was in important respects highly visible. The Principal expressed a strong commitment to the program, and indicated a possible expansion of its role - part of a general orientation to school development based on consolidating strengths rather than fragmenting effort and resources. In that context, she saw Peer Support as one of the school’s Professional Development priorities and, acknowledging the Peer Support Foundation’s policy, tabled the possibility that over a period of time all staff members might receive formal Peer Support Foundation training. At the same time, the Principal expressed a strong view that the program was not, and was
unlikely ever to be, the ‘lynchpin’. Peer Support is related ambivalently to curriculum – in part, it is positioned as part of the key curriculum offering in social learning, and in part, it is treated as outside the core teaching and learning program. The timetabling of the program, discussed above, tacitly positioned the program outside core curriculum, and as part of behaviour management strategy.

Staff support for the Program and the impact it may already be having in the school suggest that it is worth considering carefully whether the Program might usefully be accorded a more central role. In that context, the following issues might be explored:

1. More extensive integration and explicit relation between Peer Support and the KLA core curriculum; considerations include:
   - Some teachers, at least, are clearly treating Peer Support as part of their formal curriculum.
   - The school has a declared aim of working towards closer integration of KLAs.

2. The current budget arrangements. The present arrangement, with no dedicated budget line, but strong support from the principal and access to the curriculum budget on the same basis as other curricular areas seems to be working – no staff member indicated any sense that the program lacked resources. This does leave the program potentially vulnerable in the event of a change of Principal, less pro-actively committed to the program. One suggestion is that a careful costing of the program be undertaken in case it becomes necessary in future to construct a budget line for the program, and with a view to implementing any decision to embark on a systematic program of staff training with the Peer Support Foundation.

3. Staff training. The Principal indicated broad in principle support for this, but if the program were to be expanded, or even maintained in its present form, there is obvious value in considering the development of a more concrete PD plan. An ongoing extension of Peer Support training for teachers would insure the program against loss of key staff, and allow a wider sharing of the workload involved. In the event that the
role of the program was expanded, wider training would equip all teachers to integrate Peer Support ingredients in their curricular planning.

4. Visibility. There are signs that a significant number of parents know about the program and see it in positive terms. The Newsletter already serves as a useful means of informing about the program. Especially if the program were given a greater role, it might be important to consider ways to inform parents more fully of what it involves and its contribution to students’ learning.

5. Maintaining interest in the group activities. Teachers and Leaders commented on some of the difficulties in program content, especially for younger students; some students also commented that some activities were boring or repetitive. The Principal, too, noted the danger of the program becoming ‘jaded’. These factors suggest the importance, if the program is to continue on a more regular or continuing basis, of looking carefully at program materials and making decisions about whether they might usefully be modified.

Conclusion

The program has been in operation for parts of two years; in 2005 for only one 5 week unit. Responses are extremely positive. Benefits appear to include increasing cross age relationships and enhanced relationship between mainstream and SEU students, the development of a common language for dealing with personal difficulties and interpersonal relationships. In addition, the program appears to have attained a significant level of visibility within the curriculum, especially in relation to values and social learning. Key factors in the success of the program appear to be:

- the small ‘community’ character of the school,
- the enthusiastic support by staff,
- the proactive engagement of the Principal,
- the timetabling of the program so that it has ‘space’ to be well set up, flexible and free of any sense of clash with other curricular activities, and
- the Leaders’ sense of ownership of the program.

The program is not accorded a central role in the school’s program, and there are clearly a number of ways this role could be expanded and enhanced. It is conceivable that the benefits of such an expansion would be even greater than they appear to be already. These appear to warrant careful consideration; the evaluation of such possibilities, of course, must be undertaken within the school’s broader strategic planning process.