

Case study of the PEER SUPPORT PROGRAM

at

Townsville Central State School

Completed as part of the

Values Education Good Practice Schools Project (2005)

When she was new to the school and our [peer] group, I said to one of our group members [a Year 1 student] “Hey Jamie, we’ve got Clare in our group she’s new and he went up to Clare, and he went up to her [in the playground] and shook her hand and said

“Welcome to Central”

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School Background and context

Townsville Central State School was established in 1869 and now has a population of 188. The school is located near Townsville's central business district (CBD) and main tourist precinct. The school population reflects the changing local area. Approximately 60% of the population live in the school catchment area, with the remainder representing CBD workers who utilise the school's After School Care centre, or a more transient population who are located in emergency or other local accommodation for short periods. Seven percent of the school's population is from a non-English Speaking background and this group appears to be increasing in number. Only 5% of the school is Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, a lower proportion than found in many other state schools in the area. School stability and enrolment continuity measures indicate higher than average school population mobility.

Townsville's current rapid growth and CBD renewal program have the potential to change the nature of the school's population, but the exact impact of the local development is unclear. Higher density dwellings are appearing in the immediate school neighbourhood and these dwelling may be too small or cost-prohibitive for many potential enrollees. The recently vacated hospital adjacent to the school may be renovated and include some public housing access but no plans are approved. Two non-state schools in the local area attract significant out of area enrolment and are planning for considerable expansion. Maintaining Townsville Central State School as a distinctive school will be essential to ensure population growth. The school vision, displayed consistently across the school is "*to be judged by the community as the premier school in Townsville*".

The school has recently appointed a permanent principal following the retirement of a long-serving principal. Prior to this retirement, 2003 and 2004 saw periods of leadership flux with long service leave and acting principal roles. In 2005 Mr Anthony Ryan was appointed as acting principal and then secured the position in a permanent capacity from May.

Peer support program-overview

In 1999 the visiting Behaviour Management teacher (current Principal) suggested the introduction of the *Peer Support* program. The Year 7 teacher at the time and the behaviour management teacher noted a significant population within the school who required high levels of support. These students included children of women in the local refuge, children in transient foster care at a local centre (now demolished) and the children of patients in the now abandoned neighbouring hospital. The Year 7 teacher at the time was also renowned for her work with students identified as having behaviour problems and as such a range of students was referred to the school. The *Peer Support* program appeared to support this range of children and their immediate transition and integration needs. The long history of the *Peer Support* program in other locations and its apparent success in a range of school environments ensured support from school staff and so consequently the program was introduced in 2000.

Now, although some characteristics of the student population have changed, the program remains central to the schools supportive school framework and is clearly visible in a range of school documents, particularly those produced recently. The annual planning document position the *Peer Support* program “*as the main vehicle for the maintenance of good behaviour and relationships with the school*”. Although a central component, the school Behaviour Management plan outlines a range of classroom and school based strategies to promote a positive learning environment including a reward system, behaviour levels and a buddy teacher system. The Behaviour Management plan also has a specific reference to the role of the *Peer Support* program which is seen to develop “*closer links across the entire school and promotes positive decision making*”.

The current structure of the *Peer Support* program is based on the *Peer Support* Foundation’s guidelines but is adapted to the school’s needs. Year 7 students are inducted into their role following a 2-day leadership training program. In 2005 this training was conducted on site at Townsville Central School and also attended by Year 7

students from a neighbouring school. The training for the students is subsidised by the school budget and additionally this year supported by a Townsville Rotary Club grant of \$750. The Rotary club has been a consistent financial contributor to the *Peer Support* program. On completion of the training, the leadership status of the students is celebrated by the presentation of specially designed Peer Leaders Shirts, donated by the local city councillor. Year 6 students are designated as co-leaders as part of a leadership mentor role, and are provided with co-leader badges, also presented to students. The badges and shirts are worn each Friday.

The whole school participates in the *Peer Support* program in a designated half-hour lesson each Friday at 10am. The school has approximately 15 *Peer Support* groups, each with two designated *Peer Support* Leaders and two Year 6 co-leaders. The Year 7 teachers coordinate the program and spend from 1.45-2.30pm each Thursday co-preparing the lesson with the Year 7 students. Although initially the school relied heavily on the *Peer Support* Foundation material as the basis for each lesson, in the last 2 years with the guidance of Year 7 teachers, the students increasingly determine the curriculum. As a teacher explains,

In the past the students spent too much time reading out of the booklet and just doing what the booklet said to do.

The students have established a set format for the lesson including a warm up game and then the core lesson segment. Each Friday morning in the half hour prior to the *Peer Support* lesson, the Year 6 co-leaders meet with their Peer Leaders to review the activities for the lesson and discuss group management etc. The preparation phase of the program then, effectively involves all Year 6 and Year 7 students, and the Year 6 and 7 teachers.

The school resourcing for *Peer Support* reflects its history. Initially, formal training conducted by the *Peer Support* Foundation was seen as a priority. The cost of this training once membership to the Foundation is paid (approximately \$120) is \$210 per staff member (plus the cost of TRS). Additional staff is trained at 50% of that cost. The school has also sponsored the Foundation to deliver training to staff. On payment of

\$1000 the Foundation delivers training to an unlimited staff number. This is obviously more cost effective than single staff training. At the outset, teacher aide time was significant and the school invested in developing bound booklets for each unit to support the Peer Leaders' work. These are currently unused in a designated filing cabinet. Teacher aide time for *Peer Support* is now minimal, but the Year 7 teacher coordinators still spend significant preparation time and are supported as required by the teacher aide.

The Principal articulates a strong vision for the program aligned to current directions in Education Queensland including *productive pedagogies*, and federal government initiatives particularly *Heath Promoting Schools*. The Behaviour Management plan is currently under revision and the Principal is looking to use the philosophy underlying *Peer Support* to promote a whole school restorative justice framework that further centres the program at the heart of the school's culture, as well as the teaching and learning program. The aspiration is the *Peer Support* philosophy will guide the school culture, and ultimately staff will be enabled to specifically identify and name the practices that support the development of the school's ethos.

Peer support program—impact

This case study involved interviews with four groups of students from all year levels and 6 staff including the Principal and a teacher aide. School documents including the following were also reviewed.

- The Parent Handbook
- The School Annual Report of Progress
- The Triennial School Review
- School Opinion Survey data (2002-2004)
- Behaviour Management Plan
- Sample School Newsletters
- School Disciplinary Absences (2002-2005)
- School advertisement in local newspaper

The Principal's determined vision for *Peer Support* as central to the school's operation is apparent in recently produced documents and reflected in the recent School Disciplinary Absence Data. In 2005, no suspensions have been recorded, perhaps indicating how far the Peer Foundation ethos of young people taking "*responsibility for their own well-being*" has developed at the school.

The school's six year implementation of *Peer Support* establishes a particular notion of the "supportive classroom environment" and it is here that the Principal's assertion of the alignment between Productive Pedagogies and the *Peer Support* program is most obvious. The interview data provided numerous examples of 'student direction', 'self-regulation' and 'social support'. Aside from having strong input into the weekly *Peer Support* lesson, *Peer Leaders* lead the weekly parade and students prepare mottos for the school noticeboard.

This high degree of student responsibility is reflected in the ways in which the whole school operates, as well as influencing the direction of the curriculum and learning programs. A range of examples of such influence were provided in the interviews including:

- A unit of work across the school on healthy eating led by the *Peer Support* leaders
- Students in younger years having their work marked by or displayed to the Peer Leaders
- Year 6 students buddying with pre-school students in Term 4 to support transition.
- Whole school activity days- Tabloid sports, Reading Rocks, coordinated by Peer Leaders and organised through *Peer Support* groups

These examples, while not exhaustive, are clear indicators of 'whole school' impact of the *Peer Support* Program. All interviewees, including recently appointed staff noted the positive culture of the school as a distinctive feature of Townsville Central State School. Students were described as playing across ages and genders and inviting their peers from all year levels to join in games in the school. Teachers' comments below highlight this inclusive and supportive environment:

Kids here are really good together and there are hardly any fights- they get along together so well (Teacher).

If you look at the children in the playground, they are all playing with everybody, there are no groups of boys playing there and girls playing somewhere else and big kids in one area and little kids in another. They are all out together and it breaks those barriers between the ages and the sexes and they are very accepting of any new child coming into the school. (Teacher)

With a mobile school population, developing a sense of belonging across the school community is seen as paramount. The students consistently described the friendly and supportive nature of the playground. Beyond a sense of support, it is clear that the *Peer Support* program systematically supports new enrollees at the school, creating an immediate sense of belonging. As one *Peer Leader* describes, even the Year 1 students become immediately aware of their responsibility to welcome new students.

“When she was new to the school and our [peer] group, I said to one of our group members [Year 1 student] ‘Hey Jamie, we’ve got Clare in our group she’s new and he went up to Clare, and he went up to her [in the playground] and shook her hand and said welcome to Central”.

Beyond a sense of belonging, several student interviewees used the word ‘family’ to describe their sense of belonging to the school. One Year 2 student specifically expressed her fondness for the *Peer Support* program stating the following:

“I like it [because] on Friday we are a family”

The students also expressed general enjoyment of the *Peer Support* lesson.

“They are all good” Year 2 student

The younger students focussed on the ‘games’ played, giving animated examples of the enjoyment.

Paying dead fish-playing dead –lie really still (Year 3 student)

The awards offered by Peer Leaders were particularly significant to the younger students.

Beyond mere enjoyment, the older students were able to articulate the values and underlying concepts of the lesson, including the recent lesson activity that included ‘cleaning’ to promote community service and citizenship.

“We are all a family, we all have to put in some effort – TO BE INVOLVED-cleaning – you can’t just sit around and expect things to happen, you have to all help”

Year 6 and 7 students clearly valued the input of their teachers prior to and after each lesson. Not only did the preparation session assist in the lesson planning, it clearly promoted meta-cognition of the underlying concepts and linking to later life roles. The following examples indicate Year 7 students’ engagement with the program’s deeper aims.

They are teaching us to cooperate and how to be part of a community

Big people looking after little people

When you have kids you will know how to treat them

There were also examples of less tangible outcomes from involvement in the *Peer Support* program. Year 7 students were able to make links between values such as **honesty** and the lesson learned from the *Peer Support* program.

“In you Peer Support group you should feel comfortable so you don’t have to be stressed and be someone else”

Year 7 students also described the need to earn the respect of younger students within the *Peer Support* lesson promoting them to **do their best**. Students also described learning about **inclusion** and **empathy**.

You get to learn about different people’s attitudes – learn to empathises with people.

Staff who had completed the training praised the *Peer Support* program’s inclusive notion of leadership. Unlike some schools where leadership status is conferred on a limited numbers of students, staff applauded the notion of all Year 7 students being afforded leadership status through the *Peer Support* program. The school’s newspaper advertisement reinforced this inclusivity with all Year 7 students appearing in the advertisement’s photograph with the following caption.

The Townsville Central community would like to introduce our 2005 school leaders. Our School captains, [X and Y] head our peer support leaders who each week work with fellow students to make safe and healthy decisions; cope with their changing environment; and enhance their self esteem, their resilience,

their sense of self and concern for those around them. Congratulations to all of our Year 7 leaders.

Teachers reported that student confidence and **responsibility** developed over the period of leadership and significant effort was required by the leaders to earn student **respect**. Another teacher described the usefulness of the *Peer Support* program in moderating student behaviour relating their leader role in the group to the standard of behaviour required in the class.

Aside from the newspaper advertisements, the school also promoted the program to parents and the wider community through newsletter excerpts and promotional literature. The students invite the Rotary club to the school annually in appreciation of their support for the program. In 2004 this involved the preparation of a lunch, and in other years a games day has been organised by the students. The Principal and some of the teachers describe a desire to make community service and awareness an increasing aspect of the program.

Peer support program- challenges/future directions

The *Peer Support* program at Townsville Central State School has moved from a highly structured program designed largely to support transient students to a program with high impact across the whole school culture. The program is now embedded in the school culture providing a platform to distinguish the school in both its learning environment and student led curriculum. There is a range of issues that the school may consider addressing if these distinguishing features are to be promoted and developed.

1. **Nurturing and naming the vision for *Peer Support* program.** With a recent permanent Principal appointment and a 6-year history of involvement with the program, there is an opportune moment to focus on the future of the program. While the Principal is clear in his aspiration, other staff indicated that there is a need to renew focus and commitment to the program. As one teacher indicates

I really think we are probably at the point where we all need to sit down together ...

At this moment in the program's history, not all staff has been trained by the *Peer Support* foundation, and more recent appointees could not describe any induction to the program and commented

"I guess you just get roped into it"

As indicated in the Triennial School Review, supporting the professional development of all staff, including teacher aides is critical. To ensure the integrity of *Peer Support* all staff, including teacher aides, need to understand the program's aims and be able to 'walk the talk'. The current review of the Behaviour Management Plan for example, provides an ideal opportunity to explore how classroom strategies can link to the underlying philosophy of *Peer Support* particularly promoting more self-regulated behaviour. A review of the use of the Level system for example may reveal some underlying contradictions with the program's aims. In addition, the movement away from using the *Peer Support* program material in each lesson assumes that staff can potentially contribute to lesson development and relate the new activities to the aims previously outlined in each of the Foundation's developed lesson. Such an assumption may be erroneous if staff have not been trained in the underlying philosophy and cannot articulate a link. The school may also consider the role of all staff in debriefing the students following each lesson as articulated by the *Peer Support* Foundation. Students interviewed reported that only Year 6 and 7 teachers play a role in developing students understanding of the concepts following the peer support lesson.

2. **Engaging the school community.** Current school documents understandably vary in their visibility of the *Peer Support* program. As these are revised, systematic naming and profiling the role of *Peer Support* will be required if the school is to promote the program as a distinctive school feature. The School Annual Report of Progress is an obvious document to focus on school partnership and could be included in SC2 and SC3. The school may consider a renewed focus on communication with parents and the wider community. Historically, parent information nights were used, and perhaps such events could be reinstated, although it is noted that the Principal is ensuring that events such as the Year 1

overview and Preschool meetings include reference to *Peer Support*. Some teachers indicated that they informed parents of the *Peer Support* program at the annual parent-teacher night, but all teachers interviewed did not provide such an overview. Systematising communication with parents should be a priority if parents are to engage with the program. Similarly if parents are to relate activities such as the Arthritis Foundation Day to the aims of the *Peer Support* program, then they need to be explicitly linked. At the moment, the newsletters provide many examples of students serving the community but such activities do not appear as related to the *Peer Support* philosophy. Students spoke of their home discussions in relation to the *Peer Support* foundation, with much of the conversation focussed around management strategies for their group. As one teacher indicated, parents currently consider *Peer Support* as a “normal” part of the school routine, but generally don’t speak about it in particularly positive ways. The school could look for opportunities to create a deeper understanding of *Peer Support* amongst the parent community and the special qualities that it develops in students and indeed the impact it has on the whole school culture.

- 3. Supporting the Peer Leaders.** Teacher and students reported the significant challenges that confront the Peer Leaders. A relatively large Peer Support group size (10 students) presents a challenge to the Year 7 leaders. One teacher reported passive student resistance to the program as a result of the challenges that group management present.

Some students don’t like it- avoid coming on Friday [but then the sport balances them] mainly because they find it difficult to cope with the younger children. A lot of the groups have behaviour problems –

Students reported the support provided by the Year 7 teachers in developing management strategies, but as one teacher indicated, not all teachers provide appropriate support in their supervision role. Again, the need for staff training is highlighted.

The teachers are there if the kids need them but sometimes the kids won’t ask. If the teachers are aware about what the program is supposed to do

and foster then they are tuned in more. These kids are 12, and if they are not wonderful leaders and often they need help.

Students who were less positive about the *Peer Support* lesson time, consistently reported that behaviour management issues impacted on their enjoyment of the lesson. Not finishing activities, having students removed from the group, and constant reprimands were all sources of frustration. As two Year 3 students noted

“You like it when your group is behaved”.

Nobody ever listens and the group keeps running around

While the training for the Peer Leaders appears to establish a framework for student led management, the school might consider a refresher program at various points of the year to ensure ongoing positive commitment to the program. The staff may also reflect on how their own management strategies provide models for students as the following student comments indicate

“I like the fact we can put people on warnings” Year 7

Teachers yell at you and peer leaders don't yell at you. Year 3

Peer support and National Values Framework –links or junctures

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

- *Care and compassion.* The peer leaders demonstrated outstanding instances of caring for younger students during the interviews and as reported by the teachers.
- *Respect.* The *Peer Support* process clearly promotes respect for each other and teachers.
- *Responsibility.* Students leading activities and taking high levels of responsibility for their peers and curriculum development.

- *Understanding Tolerance and Inclusion.* Ensuring that new students are made to feel a part of the school community, the explicit activities related to charity support all foster the values of understanding, inclusion and tolerance.
- *Honesty.* Staff and students described how the program explicitly develops sincerity in actions through the development of a culture of confidence within the *Peer Support* group that enables students to be themselves.

The remaining four values could all be argued to be implicit to the *Peer Support* program and process.