Students Supporting Students

A Student-Run Mental Health Promotion Approach

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Increasingly, health and education practices are recognising the central role of active student participation (in decision-making and in action) in the achievement of important outcomes for young people and for schools. In this issue of Connect, some recent reports and resources are reviewed, which place the active participation of students at the core of their pedagogy.

Yet we still struggle with some essential aspects of this. The incorporation of these approaches into the ‘mainstream’ senior curriculum remains problematic. Too often, even those schools that have a strong commitment to student decision-making and the creation of authentic learning, identify the ‘external control’ of curriculum and assessment at this level (and its influence on the nature of the learning) as a barrier to continuation of exciting and engaging approaches. Too often, students tell us that they must ‘drop out’ of the structures and processes that have been important and meaningful to them, to concentrate on the ‘real work’. This remains a significant challenge.

Secondly, we still struggle around ideas of inclusive practice. If we talk with young people who are not experiencing success at school, we’re also aware that they see themselves as being ‘locked out’ from access to meaningful and important decision-making. And this occurs despite schools’ recognition of this as an issue and, in some cases, schools’ intentions to address diversity and inclusion directly. Is it too hard? Is it easier to meet educational and program objectives by actively involving only those students who present in positive ways? Or, even more importantly, are our approaches and ideas of participation inherently culturally biased? For example, how do ideas of ‘strong and active participation’ sit alongside ideas of ‘respect for elders’ in traditional and Indigenous communities? We have been interested to explore this issue for many years. One start might be to challenge and support young people within these communities to explore the issues - and Nadia Mohamed presents some initial thoughts in this issue.

While student participatory approaches were themselves marginal, we perhaps could afford to concentrate on the ‘main game’ and allow the difficult issues to pass us by. But as the centrality of the ideas we have been advocating become accepted, we need to seriously address their contentious and difficult aspects.

These remain amongst the important questions to ask, and the important practices to explore - through arguing, planning, trying things, collecting data and reflecting. We’d be interested to hear from you if you’re willing to join that debate and exploration.
Students Supporting Students is a student-led peer support approach that has been developed by two NSW schools: Narara Valley High School and Walcha Central School. Here, students work in various ways - informal and formal - to listen to their friends, to help them solve their difficulties and to build a whole-school ethos of caring and support. Students play a central role in organising and operating this approach: experienced students choose others to be trained (in areas such as active listening, verbal and non-verbal communication, problem solving and confidentiality) so that they are able to respond to friends’ needs.

The work of these students has been documented as part of MindMatters, a national mental health promotion approach, that has reached 85% of secondary schools throughout Australia. This documentation, through the Australian Guidance and Counselling Association (AGCA) could provide other schools with assistance to develop similar approaches.

The Need
Recent national studies on the mental health of young people indicate that as many as one in five students may experience mental health problems. However, less than one in four of these will receive help and support. It is also known that students often turn first to their friends for help (even more often than they turn to families), but that these friends are uncertain about how to respond.

Further, students’ positive engagement with school is closely linked to the positive mental health of those students. The Students Supporting Students approach aims to build a community where students feel it is safe to talk and where they will be listened to.

Evaluations of formal peer support programs have indicated that students don’t necessarily turn to members of a trained peer support team for support and advice, but rather they turn to their friends. Thus this approach differs from others in that it trains a variety of friends throughout the school to be able to offer that support.

The students at these schools have described the need for their training: “Life today is full of struggles and difficulties; everyone needs to talk to someone. Everyone has ups and downs and needs support. Students often don’t feel comfortable talking to teachers and thus turn to peers - who are usually untrained in dealing with issues. We should all be trained in how to help one another.” Other students also note: “Caring for your peers is important in a school community. If you have no-one to talk to, you may feel extremely left out. We care for people because they may be having a hard time at home or school... We look after people who aren’t having the easiest time.”

Angie, one of the experienced students who has been central to organising this approach at her school, says, “I’ve always had my friends coming to me with their sometimes trivial and sometimes major issues, so it’s really helped me to communicate with my friends and be a good listener.”

Characteristics of this approach
The students from these two schools tell us that this approach is about:
- trusting students to lead;
- training students to respond to peers’ needs;
- building teacher-student relations;
- students feeling trusted, supported and included in their school community and in decision-making.

The students use elements from various kits and peer support programs, but their story concentrates on how these are used within the school. Here are some of the elements:

Who?
The students who are trained provide a cross-section of the school’s students; students describe them as “the good, the bad, the sporty, the academic etc - not just the ‘good’ students or the ‘stand-out’ students” and say this makes the approach work well.
“You might be the person in class who is goofing around and just being an idiot all the time,” says Angie. “The teacher might not think you’re a good role model or leader or anything. But then you might go into the playground and actually be a really compassionate person who’s easy to talk to, so it’s really good to get that perspective.”

Steve, a teacher who supports the approach at one of the schools, adds, “We’ve got the super-intelligent kids, the super-sporty kids and we’ve got everybody in between … and that’s why it works so well. We’ve actually found that the kids with high support needs are the better counsellors: they’re more approachable for the other kids who have got problems.”

Students and teachers work together to choose those to be trained. One student explains: “We know the little groups: you’ve got your punks, you’ve got your surfies. There’s all these little cliques that happen.” Then she adds: “I was mainly chosen because I was a ‘problem child’. That’s where I think it’s a lot better. It’s more beneficial for those kids who do have problems. If I’m walking through the office and I see a kid outside the Deputy Principal’s office, I’ll pull them aside and say ‘What’s happening?’ and get their trust in that way. Being the kind of student who used to be outside the Principal’s office, I can kind of connect with them. I can get in with them and talk with them.”

Training
These schools describe how they went away on a three-day camp together to run training activities. But you don’t have to go away, they explain; their first training was carried out in a local hall. It is valuable to get out of the school, so that everyone can concentrate on the training.

Experienced students play a central role in devising and delivering the training. They work with the teachers and use materials from various programs to run activities around values, communication and problem-solving. All participants acknowledge that the student-run sessions are highly effective.

How does it work?
This is not a program with a separate ‘peer support team’ that runs timetabled activities for other (usually younger) students. Rather students (between 15 and 30 at any one time) are trained and available to offer informal support. They can be approached by friends, they sometimes approach others who they perceive to be in need … and they also sometimes go into pastoral or welfare classes to work with teachers. This approach has many facets in its operation in all areas of school life and includes student initiatives to enhance school ethos and atmosphere.

April (a Year 12 student) says, “It’s become a whole school feeling to be caring for each other and it’s become acceptable and expected that we should be there to help each other.” Steve notes: “Our major problems don’t happen because the kids are in there discussing things at a minor level. When problems are starting, kids are there talking with other kids and it stops them coming to a head and exploding.”

Who runs it?
This approach is very student driven; it operates as a strong partnership between students and teachers (and this also characterises it in comparison with other programs). Students take responsibility for providing support, but also for organising activities, for selecting and training the new students and for keeping the approach going in these schools.
What resources are available?

Students and teachers from the two schools have documented their approach in a multi-media kit of materials, and this provide descriptions and a decision-making tool for use in other schools. They emphasise that there is no ‘one way’ to implement this approach, and that students and teachers need to discuss and plan together how it will be implemented in each school.

However, the lessons that these schools have learnt are being made progressively available - possibly through the redevelopment of the MindMatters materials. Check the website of the Australian Guidance and Counselling Association (AGCA) for details:

www.agca.com.au

The materials consist of

- a ‘map’ or ‘journey board’ with about 25 cards that the students have written explaining the steps they take within the approach. This can be used to start discussions and planning between students and teachers. This is accompanied by an ‘organising manual’ and a ‘travel diary’ in which you can record your own decisions;
- two videos/DVDs - one ‘mainly for students’ and the other ‘mainly for teachers’ - that describe the work of the schools and place this in context. These also talk about the practical aspects of organising such an approach. The former is already available on the AGCA website.

The Principal of one of these schools endorses this approach whole-heartedly: “Of all the welfare programs I’ve seen in place, or been part of, this is easily the most successful ... because it’s student-centred, it’s run by the students - students are dealing with students. And the results are far better.”

April also sums up the benefits for her: “I’ve seen teachers as a real authority figure and I was trying to defy that. Once I was in this situation where we were seen as equals, where I was given respect and trust and really valued, it was then that I started to change my attitude towards people. I’m a lot better because of it now.”

How the Students Supporting Students resource was put together ...

The Students Supporting Students kit was largely written by students from the two NSW schools that have been operating similar programs in recent years: Narara Valley High School and Walcha Central School. Their stories are told in the accompanying DVD/video.

In particular, the students wrote the elements of the ‘map’ that is part of this resource. This writing occurred around three visits we made to the schools. On the first visit, we asked the students if they were interested to share their experiences with other students around Australia. Not all of the students wished to do this: some were more interested just to work within their schools without taking on a further task.

The students who were interested to be involved in the documentation (and there were large numbers who were) then brainstormed about what the essential elements of their programs were at their individual schools. We then met them again at their training camp early in 2006. There the elements were shaped into specific questions that an ‘outsider’ might want answered; these questions were sent back to the students at the schools.

After the camp, teams of students continued to write responses to the questions. We coordinated and edited the separate responses together and went back to each school, where we conducted day-long workshops for further refining and writing. Here we initially came up with the idea of a ‘board game’, but then decided against this (as it could seem to imply that there were winners and losers in this approach) and the idea of a map or journey was developed instead.

Finally, the edited text of the cards was sent back to the student writers for checking and approval.

Similarly, the student DVD/video was made with the same students, as they talked through some of the elements they had written about: choosing, training, publicising, supporting and maintaining the Students Supporting Students approach.

Roger Holdsworth
On the 16th June 2006, Class TV (the Year 9 and 10 media elective at Thornbury High School in Victoria) was awarded the Antenna Award for best Youth Community program.

The Awards were held at Federation Square in Melbourne and celebrated the best programs made by the four licensed and three aspirant Community Television stations around Australia. We beat well known programs like Teenwire from Perth and Sk8 to Death from Brisbane as well as a number of other worthy programs. The Award was accepted by James Todorov, Jacqui Bragianis, Bradley Canning and Virginia Filopoulos of Year 9 - James in particular spoke very well.

The actual winning episode showcased Boysworld and was made with students from last year’s VCE Media class; the main contributors were Rein Kivivali, Jack McCloskey and Nick Gilmour. Boysworld was commissioned by Newcastle University’s Family Action Centre to stimulate discussion at their international forum Working with boys: building fine men at the Melbourne Convention Centre. Boysworld explores boys’ attitudes to Learning, Literacy and Identity. The show also contained a claymation piece from Montrose Primary and an animated feature made by Thornbury High’s Nick Gilmour. The show was hosted by Jayme Taylor of Year 10 and Ashley Vola of Year 9 featured in the introduction. It was a great solid half hour of programming.

Importantly, Class TV is the only show based in mainstream High School curriculum, with students engaged in ‘authentic learning’. Students interview, film and edit the show’s weekly content. The Year 9 and 10 Elective has produced 41 episodes including four showcasing ‘Class Clowns’ from the Melbourne Comedy Festival. We are currently in negotiations with the National Trust to film a pilot in the Old Melbourne Magistrates Court with a view to scripting legal scenarios involving youth issues. Class TV also features segments made in other classes from Home Economics to Automotive, in part to introduce ICT across the curriculum as well as providing variety in programming. The current VCE media class is also involved in producing content as part of Outcome 4: the Production Unit. With the quality and cheapness of the new digital cameras and editing software, students could even make pieces at home. Our motto is that young people should be “creators and not just consumers” of media.

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I interviewed some young people from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds about their experiences of participation and civic engagement.

The 16 young people I interviewed varied in age (from 15 to 24 years) and cultural background (from Somalia, Eritrea, Lebanon, Palestine and South Africa). Approximately half of these young people were active participants in organisations such as sporting or other recreational clubs or youth organizations; the other half didn’t participate in any type organisation.

There were more females than males in clubs and organisations that were not sport-related, reflecting a general trend amongst young women from culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds for low participation in sports. More young women than young men were members of youth reference committees and roles that required long term engagements: of those young people interviewed who were on committees, only one in seven were male.

**Nature and history of participation**

All of the young people I interviewed wanted to participate actively, and saw this as a form of community development. However, they said that they would need to find the right club or organisation. In particular, males had a lower commitment to youth organisations, but attended one-off events.

The length of time spent in Australia also contributed to CLD young people’s willingness to participate in community development. Few of the CLD young people interviewed said that they joined any kind of a youth organisation within the first couple of years of arriving in Australia.

For those young people who had become active, this was usually in ethnic or religious specific organisations. These were familiar groups, that provided security and support. All of the young people who participated in some kind organisation said that they and their contributions were valued by the organisation. Even those who weren’t currently active in an organisation believed that they would be valued and drew upon responses to previous short-term involvement.

**Indicators of value**

Common indicators of being valued were being acknowledged and encouraged, receiving personal thanks from those who benefited from their assistance, receiving positive feedback in general, and seeing the implementation of their suggestions.

**Reasons for participation or non-participation**

Young people said they took part in order to make friends and socialise, to work with a group of people who share the same ideas, to have their ideas heard, to have their ideas implemented, to belong and to feel they were contributing time and skills, and to gain personal skills such as being able to plan an event, communication skills and networking skills.

Those young people who were not active participants said that this was because they did not find an organisation that attracted them, the organisations didn’t have the same goals as the young people, they didn’t feel welcomed, they were too busy studying, they didn’t know what was available, they wanted to but never got round to it, or they couldn’t be bothered.

Are our ideas about participation culturally determined? How do concepts of ‘active participation’ and ‘civic engagement’ sit alongside ideas of ‘respect for elders’ in various cultures?

This is a difficult issue that requires on-going thought and investigation.

Nadia Mohamed recently talked with several young people from various migrant and refugee backgrounds to explore some of the aspects of this issue.
Meanings of ‘youth participation’ in Australia compared with countries of origin

None of the CLD young people I interviewed in this study directly attributed their participation or lack of participation to simply their cultural or parental views on participation. However, some mentioned attitudes that compared the importance of participation with other outcomes:

“Although CLD communities in Australia do not discourage the participation of young people in community development, young people feel pressured to go into more ‘prestigious’ professions and not [be involved in] community development.”

All respondents said that they felt that they could participate more as young people in Australia than they could in their countries of origin, and all said that they believed there would be more progress in the original counties had there been more youth participation encouraged and welcomed by government. The nature of the participation in the country of origin that was reported by young people was very superficial eg a youth day where young people got together in a poorly managed oval with music etc. They reported such attitudes as:

“I don’t think youth engagement was recognised or valued in my country of origin, not like in Australia; and if it was, it was mainly about boys.”

“There weren’t youth facilities. Attitude and policies, where youth is concerned are different to Australia.”

Some of this points to differences in the status of young people – the ‘construction of youth’ – in different societies, or to more specific instances of political control of young people’s participation:

“From what I can remember there wasn’t much youth engagement. There wasn’t such a thing as a young adult; you were either a child or an adult.”

“In order for youth to be a part of community development they have to have the same ideas as the government, which is the only way youth can get involved.”

There were no reports of any long-term changes (such as the policies of the governments of these young people’s countries of origin) that were influenced by young people.

Youth participation in mainstream organisations

The respondents felt that organisations such as local Councils and mainstream youth organisations in Australia do not involve or encourage CLD young people enough. These CLD young people felt that, when they were formally invited to participate such groups, this was done out of obligation to grant requirements, rather than as a genuine regard for the importance of participation by CLD young people. These CLD young people would like to be involved more, to help both their immediate communities as well as the broader community:

“I don’t think my culture influences my participation on the grand scale; sure it would be nice to go to culturally informed functions and so on but if I don’t go, who will teach?”

Nadia Mohamed

A student focus group exploring learning issues in Stage 4 at Asquith Girls High School. (Photo from case study on NSW SRC website)