Can students 'Make a Difference'? (and do they believe it?)

...research study on student cynicism...

In this issue:

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- Why Have an SRC Constitution?

& Incorporating the PASTA Newsletter #6

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Connect, 12 Brooke Street, Northcote 3070 Victoria Australia
Buried in this issue (p 10) is a short article outlining the formation, through the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA), of a student participation e-mail list. This provides an exciting addition to the print-based services currently offered by Connect. Hopefully, it will enable people involved and interested in student participation issues to 'chat' more informally at a rapid pace than is possible through the print medium.

Have a look at the details and, if you have access to e-mail, subscribe and get involved. This is a service, designed by ACSA to increase networking opportunities amongst teacher students, parents, administrators, academics etc.

At the same time, there have been discussions with the Victorian Electoral Education Centre and the Victorian Department of Education about setting up electronic support for the operation of 'student democracy'. That might mean a student (SRC or JSC)-oriented e-mail list, a 'chat room', a series of web pages... the details are still emerging. A group of students who are active in SRCs and networks recently met at the EEC to talk over needs, and discussed possibilities for electronic resources that would help in sharing practical information (eg 'how to write an SRC constitution' - see p 22 of this issue or in holding 'virtual meetings' that avoid the problems of distance and travel. Keep watching!

It is interesting that these positive moves are developing at the same time as the release of a report on an important study from Suzanne Mellor at the Australian Council for Education Research (ACER) (pages 3 to 7 of this issue) about student cynicism about their ability to influence political processes. This research study has important and urgent things to say about the development of Civics and Citizenship courses in Australian schools - as does the ongoing experience of students in classroom participation and in student and school governance at both primary and secondary levels.

Will the courses that are being developed, and the professional development to be offered for teachers, recognise and build on this work?

Connect stands ready to play a strong role in supporting real learning about the present and active role of young people as valued citizens.

Roger Holdsworth

NEXT ISSUE: #112 - August 1998
Deadline for material: end of July
There is a move about in educational circles which suggests that Civics Education (whatever that might mean) is the ‘flavour of the month or year’ and, in Australia, is going to be appearing in your school, soon.

The curriculum and its materials are going to be called ‘Discovering Democracy’. Up to now the discussion has been conducted amongst a select few, and on the basis of some strongly asserted, but under-argued, propositions. Schools and teachers will need to come to grips with many of the issues before they attempt to introduce this curriculum, and it will be no easy matter for them to do this. In an effort to assist teachers and schools in this task, the Australian Council for Educational Research has conducted a research project and recently published a report called ‘What’s the Point?’: Political Attitudes of Victorian Year 11 Students.

The Research

In the research, I approached six secondary coeducational schools in Victoria, four from the government system, one Catholic and another privately-run Christian school. The schools were ‘representative’ in the sense that they espoused a range of school climates and ethos, and allowed or encouraged a differing range of student participation in the school’s governance. They were similar in that, like most schools outside Queensland, they had no specific Civics or Citizenship education program. 633 students were involved in the study.

The students filled out a questionnaire and joined in discussions with me in groups, and related their school experiences to the broader political processes. The research used the same instrumentation as an international study just completed in five countries by Carole Hahn (see references), and this allowed valuable comparisons to be drawn between the Victorian and similar students from England, Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and the United States of America.

The study examined students’ attitudes in the following areas: classroom climate, political experiences and interest, political trust, political efficacy, political confidence, attitudes to equal political rights for women, and political tolerance - free expression and civic rights.

Research into the political attitudes of young people has a history going back to the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Civics study of the late 1960s, and most of the items used on this questionnaire have links with that study. In Australia, very little work has been done, at any time, on the political attitudes of young people. ACER judged the time was ripe for such work, with the forthcoming Discovering Democracy materials due to arrive in schools late in 1998 and with concern expressed by teachers and academics at conferences about the type of materials, and the consequent curriculum, which might flow from the Discovering Democracy project.

ACER believed that a better understanding by us all, school administrators, SOSE teachers and policy-makers, of the current state of political attitudes of Australian students - the future recipients of the Discovering Democracy materials - was desirable. It was hoped that such understandings should assist in the development of curricula and processes in school governance which would lead to students being more engaged in school, and ultimately more engaged in the political processes in adult life. Increased participation was the goal of the Civics Expert Group’s report, published in 1995: Whereas the People... and this participation was recommended to be facilitated by the introduction of civics and citizenship education courses in Australian schools.
Overall Research Results

The data collected in this study indicate that Victorian students' political attitudes are more negative than those of most of their international peers. On five of the seven scales, and one part of the sixth, the Victorian students are ranked as either the lowest or second lowest of the six cohorts of students. This indicates the depth of problems which will have to be addressed before the Discovering Democracy materials can be successfully implemented.

Victorian students showed a more positive response than their international colleagues from three or more of the five other cohorts on only one of the scales: Political Tolerance: Civic Rights. They were more prepared than most to allow civic rights to those groups whose views they disliked. This was the brightest finding of the study, and it is encouraging that the positive work done in promoting tolerance in schools (and in Australian society generally) has had some effect. Teachers in other countries have already expressed interest in these findings, and plan to investigate how we have achieved such results.

On only one of the seven scales do Victorian students demonstrate that their political attitudes are positive. By registering a mean of 4.16 (on a range up to 5.00) on the Equal Rights for Women scale, they indicate their attitude to this political issue is a positive one. However their response ranked the lowest (that is the least positive) of the six countries, which rather undermines any optimism which could be felt at the findings.

On most scales the Victorian students generally demonstrated greater gender differences in attitudes than had been demonstrated by the international students. The Victorian female students were more positive in their attitudes to the Classroom Climate they experienced. They were consistently more inclined to have positive attitudes regarding Equal Political Rights for Women. No gender differences between male and female students were discernible in their attitudes to Political Confidence. However, despite this last comment, and the fact that there was only a slight gender difference on attitudes to Political Experience, the male students consistently demonstrated more positive attitudes towards Political Interest and Future Political Activities. The male students were slightly, and consistently, more positive in their attitudes regarding Political Efficacy than the female students and they demonstrated more Political Trust. Finally, the female students were more inclined to disagree with racism, were more inclined to support freedom of the press in the abstract and freedom of speech in general, and were more likely to allow civic rights to the group of which they disapproved. Schools will need to understand the ramifications of these gender findings before they can successfully teach civics or citizenship education to either, or both, boys and girls.

Experiences of Democracy

That the Victorian students have lower levels of concern about political matters than their international fellows may be as a result of ignorance of the political process, or it may be from other causes. It behoves us to remember that these students had not experienced a curriculum which explicitly dealt with how their governments, or political processes in general, might work. Most of the discussions they refer to having had in their classes were about issues (most commonly in English, not SOSE, classes) rather than the complex practice of how these issues were translated into policy, and then into legislation.

The students' experience of democratic political practice external to the classroom was recorded as being very small. A tiny minority of the students (5%) had been engaged in assisting in any kind of campaign (... not even for a school position, one asks). Only 36% of the students had ever been an office-holder, a football captain, a prefect, or representative to a student representative council. This is abysmally low for a group of students who have been in school for over ten years, but even if the explanation for the figure is that they cannot remember, or that the occasion is insignificant, the sense of engagement is distressingly poor. It is no wonder they do not feel like participants in school governance, of course, when only a third of them can recall having had any relevant experience.

Thus their interest levels in politics and school-based decision making, are also unsurprisingly low. Only 25% responded that the discussed, more than once a week, current events or politics with their friends, and only 40% with their parents. In addition, whilst 27% of the students asserted they were prepared to do anything (about an issue they had identified as important), 13% were prepared to demonstrate, 11% would attempt to persuade others on the issue and less than 11% were prepared to sign a petition. Over half of the students did not think they would enjoy having lessons where politics and government were discussed, and a similar number asserted they were not usually interested in politics. We could possibly ask, given their lack of experience: How would they know?.

In addition, their school experiences of democratic procedures did not assist them greatly in the learning and practice of decision-making skills. Their attitudes to the democratic nature of the climate which operated in their classrooms ranged from positive on some issues, to equivocation on others. Roughly three-quarters of the students thought their teachers encouraged them to consider many points of view on issues and to make up their own minds, and they felt free to express their views, even when these differed from those of their peers.
learn the 'rules' (and the satisfactions, as well as the irritations) of participating. It is, after all, students' first engagement with an institution, one they inhabit for a long time, which has significant, long-term importance for them.

What's the Point?

The title of the report, *What's the Point?* was chosen because it was the constant refrain I heard as I went round schools administering the questionnaire time and again, of where some had tried, only to be knocked down.

The school administrators, on the other hand, say the kids aren't interested or that they give up when it gets hard. But this is not an acceptable response for an educator to make about learning. For isn't this 'giving up' the case with any learning, and isn't it the teacher's task to cajole, encourage, assist, and structure the learning, so that the 'giving up' by students is counteracted, and preferably prevented? Schools do it in other subject-based curricula. Instead, in the case of the skill of decision-making, schools threaten students with life-long failure at the activity of participation, (not just in the political process) by not teaching it at all, or not effectively.

Responses

It is made clear in the report's chapter on the schools, that some had gone

One concludes from this that the nature of the climate in those classrooms is satisfactory for a pedagogy which requires listening (not always an oppressive activity, if the teacher is respected). But it is not so suitable for a pedagogy which requires active democratic participation and decision making by adolescent (or younger) learners. They did not experience their schools as democratic, nor as places where they could practice meaningful decision-making. Why not? Schools need to ask themselves how they could become more amenable to providing students with chances to and listening to students. For most of them there is no point in trying to participate and get involved in influencing decisions... it will get them into trouble with administrators and teachers, have them offside with some of their peers, create havoc within classrooms where they should be doing real school work, distract them from their exams, and it's a waste of their time anyway, because schools don't want students to be part of any real decision making... they are convinced they will not be listened to by their seniors. They were able to provide evidence to some lengths (especially two of the schools, though very differently) to try to engage students in some aspects of school life. But the insignificant between-school differences on the scales suggest that much more explicit strategies than had been adopted by any of the schools will be required to shift the disillusion students feel towards trying to 'make a difference'. Schools wanting to address these issues in their administration should subscribe to (and have the administrators and students read and together discuss) 'Connect: Supporting student participation', the
bi-monthly journal of a network and clearinghouse, which publishes material from and about students who participate in their schools. The positive outcomes from the strategies which are adopted are encouraging.

The low level of student political interest demonstrated by the findings of the ACER research is going to provide a real challenge to curriculum developers and teachers, if the proposed introduction of civics and citizenship education programs in Australia is to be successful. The students' cynicism about politicians (indeed most people in power) and the apparent lack of perceived relevance of politics to the students' lives, as indicated by the findings of this study, will need to be confronted and overcome if the proposed civics education initiatives are to succeed. A better understanding of the reasons for Victorian students' low level of political interest is going to be necessary before its causes can be effectively addressed. Only then can appropriate teacher training strategies and pedagogic approaches be devised.

Disengaged and Unmotivated

This study has suggested that students are personally confident, have supportive classroom climates, and experience 'both sides of the question/issues'. But despite the efforts of school communities, they are disengaged from the political process, and are unmotivated to engage in it, both in and outside schools.

Are we agreed that the negativity of political attitudes is a serious impediment to the future effective functioning of our participatory, democratic, political system? If so, then efforts to 'improve' those attitudes, that is, to make them more positive, must be undertaken. Policy, both at the public curricula and classroom levels needs to confront this cluster of attitudes and views, to redress the cynicism, before any meaningful impact on the knowledge learnings about government, via a knowledge-based curriculum, such as the Discovering Democracy curriculum, can be successfully undertaken.

In addition, this study provides some evidence as to why the kind of program being envisaged in the Discovering Democracy project, and the way in which it is proposed it be delivered, appear to be misguided. The report also offers a critique of the program and some of the assumptions which underlie it. Even the placement of civics within the single ambit of one Key Learning Area (KLA), is something many schools and their SOSE teachers might find contentious. It is certainly a proposition which the second IEA Civics Study, currently being undertaken in 27 countries, including Australia, finds debatable.

Such a materials-based program will not facilitate appropriate pedagogy because it disenfranchises the very practitioners whose contribution the conceptualisation is essential to the program's success. Materials-based curricula initiative diminishes the power of pedagogy as a curriculum issue. Yet the role of pedagogy for teaching is learning of participatory democracy; processes is central to the intrinsic citizenship education. Ownership by participants of the citizenship goals be pursued in civics curriculum thus ensuring goal appropriateness to the learning community, is essential to the integrity of the curriculum. The findings on the classroom climate scale reported in this study offer insight relevant to the importance of pedagogy and ownership in this curriculum. Furthermore, the structure of the Discovering Democracy program in its development to date, has adopted such a reductionist: approach to the view of what constitutes a civics curriculum that it has narrowed rather than enlarged the horizons of possible content. Past experience and theoretic considerations have not been acknowledged. On both pedagogic and conceptual counts, the debate has been pre-empted.

Another difficulty associated with facilitating a discussion of a civics curriculum is that informed debate is practically impossible. Who can conduct or engage in this debate? The study demonstrates...
low levels of student interest in, and understanding of, political processes. As part of a circular route, these low levels of knowledge and participation act as both a cause, and are a result, of the low priority that has been placed on ensuring teacher preparedness to teach children about the area. In the same way as studies of Society and the Environment have been somewhat marginalised in the school curriculum during the 1990s, so has the demand for SOSE teachers been reduced. The numbers of teacher trainees studying civics issues, within the reduced SOSE intake in teacher training institutions, has been, and is still, minuscule. The incentives for teachers to become engaged in civics education have been non-existent. This situation means substantial teacher preparation, combined with the re-orientation of the SOSE curriculum in schools, will be required before civics education, of any description, can be effectively implemented in schools.

There will also be some effort required to convince parents of the need or desirability of such a curriculum, and of the capacity of teachers to teach it. In a recent poll taken by the Australian Parents’ Council, 41% of parents thought civics should not be compulsory (as is proposed) and over 60% thought teachers could not teach civics without showing bias. It is worth reminding ourselves that the students in the ACER study did not agree with this, but then, who would believe a student?!

Furthermore, teachers skilled in, and comfortable with, a debate on the pedagogic issues involved in teaching civics and citizenship education are a rare breed. Practitioners who are currently skilled in both the appropriate knowledge and pedagogy are almost unknown, although individuals with these expertise do exist ... witness the students’ responses on classroom climate. The report outlines the extent to which some secondary schools have introduced a sense of participation by students in the decision making in their schools, but the effect on political attitudes does not appear to have been positive. The students’ low sense of the political efficacy of the political process impacts on this, and there is little schools can do about this aspect of the problem - though one could always discuss this aspect of the problem with students.

Need for Discussion

It is desirable that wide-ranging discussions of the disputed issues associated with a participatory, citizenship curriculum be undertaken. The practitioners with appropriate expertise in the curriculum and/or the pedagogy of participation and politics need to lead the debate. Only by opening up the discussion in this way, can change to the experiences and attitudes of young people be effected. The disputed nature of participation demands that it be debated, by teachers and others. This is not new, and it will always be so.

The disputed nature of participatory, citizenship curricula is an integral part of the problematics of citizenship itself, which Australian society and its media do not routinely address. Until our society is more knowledgeable of and comfortable with them, it is not surprising that our students and their teachers are reluctant to work with them. Disputed issues around identity are demonstrated by the continued existence in the late 1990s of the One Nation party, and the release of a document in late May 1998 by the Victorian branch of the RSL which condemned multi-culturalism and the continuance of non-Anglo-Saxon immigration as dividing and not benefiting Australia. It is half a century since multiculturalism and non-Anglo-Saxon mass immigration were adopted as Australian policy and implemented. That these organisations ignore that nearly a quarter of the 1996 Australian population was born overseas (though only a tiny 5% were Asian-born) - and how many of our students are their sons and daughters...? - is to simply demonstrate the social denial we still practise. Our students have a more real world view: ‘It’d be my turn next...’, and approximately three quarters oppose racism in any form, with only 15% (twice as many boys as girls) prepared to allow newspapers to print racist material.

The adverse results of students not experiencing active participation are indicated in this study by the students’ ignorance of, and negative attitudes to, political and other decision-making processes. Young people do not want to know about things they don’t care about. (In this they resemble most people, of course.) We’ll need to encourage them to care about the outcomes of decision-making, and have them believe it’s worth being engaged, before they will bother participating in decision-making.

The Report What’s the Point? offers readers both insights into student attitudes and a range of strategies which schools can use to make themselves into places where their students will want to and can learn and practise both civics and citizenship education.

References


Holdsworth, R (ed) Connect: supporting student participation, 12 Brooke St, Northcote 3070 Victoria

What’s the Point?: Political Attitudes of Victorian Year 11 Students, by Suzanne Mellor, published by ACER Press, No 53 in its Research Monograph series, is available from the Australian Council for Educational Research, 19 Prospect Hill Rd, Camberwell, Victoria, 3124 for $29.95. (Contact: ACER Press Customer Services, (03) 9277 5656)

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ACER

Reprinted from Mellor, S (1998) 'What Can Schools do to Change Student Cynicism about Participating in Politics, Civics Curricula and Decision Making in Schools?', in set, Research Information for Teachers, 2, with the permission of the publishers, the Australian Council for Education Research and the New Zealand Council for Research.
A TASMANIAN STATEWIDE SRC

HOW WILL IT WORK?

At the end of 1997, as a result of the national conference (NASPAC 4) in Sydney, we held a conference to promote the formation of a Statewide SRC. Due to the size of Tasmania, the networking that was already done, and a highly motivated Rosny College (thanks to Kim Roberts), we gained great support from state and private school SRCs.

Our main conference, held at Rosny College, was a kick-off for promoting the State SRC. It was received well by both sectors, students were enthusiastic, and a structure was set up for organisation, communication and seeking funding.

This conference was followed by a teleconference which further clarified our strategy for 1998. The Deputy Secretary for Education, Mr Graham Harrington, supported the establishment of the State SRC financially, with a grant of $3500.

As a result of these initiatives, in 1998 the State SRC is up and running. If any readers would like to give us some pointers on how their State SRC is run, it would be greatly appreciated.

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Some issues concerning the functioning of a statewide SRC were addressed at the forum held at Rosny College in 1997. The forum was attended by students from St Brendon-Shaw College, Launceston Church Grammar, Launceston College, Hellyer College, Don College, Claremont College, Hobart College, Rosny College, Friends School, Elizabeth College and St Michael’s Collegiate. The later teleconference also involved students from St Patrick’s College, Calvin Christian School, the Hutchins School and Guildford Young College. The following report is drawn from notes of the forum and the teleconference:

Roles and Responsibilities

A State SRC should show that students and their opinions are valued, and that students can facilitate change. Students, through the State SRC, would be an active part of the education system and make input, where appropriate, to government decision making. It would have representation from all educational institutes, and provide national representation of Tasmania’s SRCs and student body in general.

Individual responsibilities - developing an executive for each branch, communication, calling monthly meetings - would be given to members.

Students on the Statewide SRC would accept or share a ‘portfolio’ for particular areas of education. Such a system would lead to accountability and credibility. TASSAB have expressed an interest in having a year 11 and 12 student on their Board, and it has also been recommended that the University Council, the Tasmanian Education Council, the Tasmanian Secondary Schools Parents and Friends Councils and others have student representation on their respective Boards. It was suggested that these bodies should be contacted and informed of the developments within student representation in Tasmania and that the logical choice of students for representation would be the Statewide SRC.

The main responsibility would be to facilitate collaborative partnerships between schools and the wider community through newsletters, student presence on bodies and organisations, representation of students’ interests and development of a web page. State SRC members would have responsibility to act on ideas and opinions and bring feedback to their constituency. Branches of the State SRC would take on specific roles within the state body.
Funding and Support

Funding would be needed for meetings (transport etc), publication of a newsletter, training courses, food and accommodation, venue hire and for guest speakers. Schools should contribute to the budget and there would be fund-raising at schools, but state government funding would also be sought. The proposal for a small levy on participating schools will be discussed at branch meetings.

Other, non-financial, support would be needed from SRC members, from staff and students in schools and from the government - in the form of representation on committees.

It was agreed that all participating schools talk to their Principals about the Statewide SRC structure and purposes. Comments from schools would be conveyed by a representative to a Principals' meeting.

Structure and Affiliations

A structure similar to that of the NSW State SRC was decided on (see the diagram). One to two members from each school would be needed. A mentor or teacher-adviser from each school should be available to be consulted and informed of decisions and to act as political and practical advisers. It was agreed that the statewide SRC should be organised and run by students. Discussions included suggestions that it would be worthwhile having access to a teacher for guidance on particular issues and to liaise between staff and other relevant administrators. It was suggested that the teacher adviser of the host school for branch meetings make themselves available at the first meeting.

Some form of year 11 traineeship would be needed to keep the State SRC active in 1999.

Democratic Process

A democratic process is important to the operation of the SRC.

Members of the State SRC will be nominated for a regional committee by individual schools. Elections will be held at the end of the previous year, though this would not necessarily be the final committee. Members nominated must be members of the school's SRC, and are then elected by the SRC and the teachers. It was agreed that schools have complete autonomy when electing or nominating a representative to the Council. A number of schools commented that, should a student accept the position of a state representative, they make a commitment to represent Tasmanian students to the best of their ability, and to follow through with their commitment.

'Portfolios' would be distributed to members. A report on each portfolio should be published in a free quarterly magazine to be distributed around the schools. This could also be published on the internet.

Each College should have a chance to host a regional meeting. Rather than having a continuing President, power should be distributed equally, with a meeting chairperson provided by the host school.

Communication and Coordination

The State SRC will communicate by phone, e-mail, through Regional and State meetings and Teleconferences. Each representative from a school keeps copies of the first-hand information and if people want to know something, they can refer to this person. There should be as many regular meetings amongst regions as possible.

There was agreement that three statewide meetings be held in 1998 - in March, June and September. Branch meetings (Southern, Northern, North-Western) are to be organised prior to the statewide meetings by host Colleges. Schools participating in the Statewide SRC should contact their branch host College with suggestions for the meeting agenda.

June 1998
Welcome to the student-participation e-mailing list.

Welcome to the new Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA) network "student-participation" list. This is a list for educators/teachers/researchers/students/parents/administrators from all sectors and levels of the education system, who are interested in student-participation issues in education. It is provided by ACSA as part of its network services. Further information can be found at the ACSA site:


Connect operates as the print form of this ACSA network - connecting ACSA members to a wider group interested and involved in student participation approaches. It is now very pleasing to be able to announce an extension of this networking that will allow Connect subscribers and others to share information electronically.

PURPOSES

1. To provide an on-line forum for sharing ideas, practice and resources on issues of student participation in education.

2. To complement print publication of information about student participation (eg Connect) with a more informal and immediate discussion, seeking and answering facility.

3. To link teachers, students, parents, administrators, researchers and others with an interest in student participation, into an on-line community based on shared concerns.

USES OF THE LIST

* To post topics for discussion;
* To make announcements;
* To ask questions of list members;
* To share information and resources;
* Anything else - e-mail lists only work if people use them - so don't hesitate to raise anything that interests or concerns you on this list.

JOINING

Anyone can join the list by sending an email to the address:

<majordomo@edna.edu.au>

and include the words:

subscribe student-participation

in the text part of the email (there is no need to include a subject line when joining).

LEAVING

To remove yourself from the list at any time, send an email to:

<majordomo@edna.edu.au>

and include the words:

unsubscribe student-participation

in the text part of the email. Don't put anything in the subject line.

SENDING

All email items sent to the address:

<student-participation@edna.edu.au>

will be automatically forwarded to every member of the group. Through this process an ongoing discussion can be maintained, issues debated and ideas shared. Any replies will also automatically go to every list member.

ARCHIVES

The messages sent to this list will be archived on the EdNA site, and a link can be found from the Network page at ACSA:

http://www.acsa.edu.au

LIST FACILITATOR

Roger Holdsworth:

<r.holdsworth@edfac.unimelb.edu.au>

The facilitator is the person who runs the discussion and interacts with the participants.

See you there!
PASS THE PASTA

Several years ago I was asked why I became involved in SRCs. The following is a brief summary of my response to that question.

I believe that every student has a responsibility to become fully involved and to share in the day to day problem solving and decision making that takes place in schools. The SRC is the most effective means by which this active involvement can be organised. As an American concept, SRCs have always relied on the goodwill of Principals for support. Advisers have had to do most of what they do without either period allowance or any Official Departmental support, although that appears to be slowly changing.

Recently, most States in Australia have taken on the concept of SRCs as worthwhile and in some the Advisers get recognition for the important work that they do in the way of period allowances, extra pay, etc. Some schools have started ‘Civics’ courses so Advisers can teach SRC as part of their teaching load, and SRC duties are, in some schools in NSW at least, taken into account for AST accreditation.

SRCs should be allowed and encouraged to get involved in real issues and real problems. Unless the SRC takes on the hard areas then they will always be looked at as a student interest structure. All SRCs should request ownership of their School and then protect it, particularly from within-school vandalism. SRCs should pay for any damage caused by the students that they represent, then investigate and make the vandal pay. This approach has had an amazing impact both on the status of the SRCs and on vandal attacks in the schools trialing this approach.

The greatest strength of the SRC movement is as always the students and staff who to date have given of their own time to work for the best interests of their schools. It was in appreciation of the efforts of these SRC advisers that I have pursued so passionately the need to establish SRC Support networks and a State and (future) National body with which to champion the cause of SRCs in Schools.

Unfortunately the load advisers have to carry has become heavier as the tasks we perform increase, so my advice to all of you who have taken on this responsibility is this - delegate or perish. That is the single most difficult thing we as advisers must do. Stop ‘doing’ and start ‘advising’. The students can do it: they just need a little time to adjust and I’ve found they often develop better and quicker ways of doing things. After all it is supposed to be for them.

Ralph Murray
PASTA President
As part of the preparation for the trip, the students involved have been asked to get in touch with members of the American Organising Committees. In some cases there has already been considerable communication. Following are some of the results:

Everyone in Bathurst is getting really excited about the trip and we can’t wait. Yesterday the five of us going (to the USA) and Mr Kingston went for a trip to West Bathurst Public school. The students from there have been corresponding with the Year 2 class in America. They have just finished their letters to them, so we just went to talk to them about why we are going and what we are going to do there. They were all really excited and some of them couldn’t believe that our parents were actually letting us go.

Stephanie
Student, Bathurst High, NSW

In the States we write our dates month-day-year. I have no clue why. I think sometimes we just try to do things to make life difficult for ourselves. The rest of the world uses the metric system, but we use standard in everything. We measure distances in miles instead of kilometers too, which you would probably find strange.

We take a lot of similar classes here. My schedule this year is Honors English, Strength and Conditioning (weight lifting), Chemistry, Spanish 2, Analysis (REALLY hard math), Seminar (kind of a study period - we are required to read for 18 minutes at the beginning of the hour and then we can go to other classrooms to get help from teachers in classes we are struggling in or have missed), American History, and Leadership (my hour to do student council stuff: nothing would ever get done without that hour!). My family loves to go skiing in the mountains in Colorado, which are 10-12 hours from here by car. They have snow year-round there. We haven’t been in a couple of years, but the scenery is breath-taking and it is so much fun! People here in Kansas also like to go to the beach on vacation since it is so far from here and we don’t see it every day. You can get the Gulf of Mexico in Texas in about 10 hours, but to a real beach, like on the Atlantic or Pacific Ocean, it is probably a 2 day drive. I have never seen the real ocean, just the Gulf.

Sara
Student, Derby HS, Kansas

I’ll bet you’ll have a wonderful Fourth of July in the Grand Canyon. You probably know that every American alive shoots off fireworks or goes to see someone else doing it. I don’t know what will be going on there, but it could be spectacular. Of course there is always the constraint of summer dryness and not wanting anything to ignite.

Bobbie said the Stuco kids from here are not going to the leadership camps this year. I asked whether their putting on this conference, with the two years that some of them have put into it, was enough leadership for one summer, and that seemed to be the case. It is impressive and heartwarming to see how some of them are taking the responsibility - even from my outside vantage point.

Heidi’s letter reached Ruby Griffiths, chair of the photography committee. Ruby made photocopies and gave them to Bobbie and me; it is a delightful letter, and she sounds like a real girl. Please tell Heidi for all of us that it is one of the nicest things we have received.

Yes! A school bus will meet you at the airport. Of course all the greeters could drive themselves - we’ll see. I know Bob and I will be there. You mentioned the relationships created by this sort of thing: Bobbie tells about a couple in Oklahoma who, when the conference was held there, hosted three boys. They have no children of their own. Those ‘boys’, on a recent Christmas, organized themselves to go there for the holiday and had a ‘family photo’ taken. They really made lifelong friendships!

Sharon
Adviser, Derby HS, Kansas

1999 USA TOUR

Plans are now under way for the second USA leadership tour to be held in June/July, 1999. The 1999 Conference will be held at Roseville, Minnesota. Interested Students/Staff should contact the tour organiser Ken Page on 02 4396 6485 or Fax 02 4393 1157.
ADVICE FOR ADVISERS

Student activities in general, and the SRC in particular, can and do provide important elements of a school’s total curriculum which both support and extend what a student can learn within more established subject areas.

“An SRC provides a mechanism for students to actively participate in their education. It can help young people develop the skills, maturity and independence to communicate, organise and to be responsible for decisions they make and actions they take. Student involvement and participation in decision making about their education can become a vital part of the school curriculum.” (Student Representative Council Kit 1988.)

This being the stated position of the NSW Department of School Education as well as something we as advisers and student leaders accept and know from experience, there should therefore be little argument from other teachers, administrators, parents and, most importantly, fellow students about the important position the SRC has or should have in a school.

The SRC has a central position as a conduit of information and opinion, as an active participant in shared decision making and as an initiator of positive, productive activities. To do so, it should be enabled to maintain honest, open communication to and from the students, the Principal and staff, the Department and the school community. Its members should be seen and heard. They, and other students, should be full members of school committees, school councils and quality assurance reviews.

Some of the needs of SRCs and SRC Advisers that are constantly heard are:

1. Boost the SRC profile/improve its image.
2. Get people motivated.
3. Involve students other than SRC members.
4. Encourage an equal balance of the sexes.
5. Set up/reorganise an SRC.
6. Learn more about others schools’ leadership programs.
7. Find new fund and ‘fun’ raising ideas.
8. Find quality time for student leaders and advisers to do their jobs.

The felt need to raise the profile or image of SRCs is critical to all the rest of our needs. Without it, SRCs will always be seen as an ‘extra’. We can change the image by repeatedly emphasising what we do, in quiet, personal ways to each student we know, to other staff and parents. In public, more direct regular activities and presentations on assemblies, campaigns of publicity for activities, can be used. Have a vision, and stick to it.

To make it work, have a team of advisers - not just one. Have your advisers include senior students. Train them (yes - staff too) and encourage them (especially staff) to lead in one of your committee areas which caters to one of their strengths. Do regular activities as part of your meetings - skills development activities, yes - but activities purely for the fun of it as well, so that your committees first, the SRC second and your student body (well, some of them anyway) feel like a team.

If your SRC is a team, reward it with some winnable goals. Start small. Start with a project - something for yourselves. Go out to lunch. Just yourselves. Talk about it later with your peers (staff and students!) Then organise a BBQ or some lunchtime activities for invited guests (the Principal of course, but also some of your friends). Make it public. Show the student body you are having fun doing some things together as a team.

Motivate yourselves first, then involve others - slowly but specifically. Appeal to everyone’s basic needs. Whatever it is you know of other students in the school, make use of it. You are thus doing things for the school, and both for and with other students. Over time, this will raise the profile of your SRC and keep you motivated through the continual involvement of others.

(This was part of an address given by Charles Kingston at the first NSW Advisers meeting in February 1996. It is still as relevant today as it was then.)
RETURN TO:
5. Other (please specify)
6. Workshops and/or forum ideas
7. Pre-conference material
8. Poster sessions
9. Future initiatives

A. These are a few ideas on

C. Additional are few ideas on

Conference
1. Making a presentation at the Conference
2. Making a presentation at the Conference
3. Hosting the Conference Steering Committee
4. Help in sponsoring this Informational Conference

B. I am/we are interested in [check all that apply to you]

- e-mail (if available)
- Phone
- Mailing Address
- Organization of School
- Position
- Name(s)
- A Contact Details

2000 Conference Committee
Phone: (02) 9322 2603; Fax: (02) 9322 2602
1 Gladstone Street, Balmain, NSW 2092
SRG 2000 Conference Steering Committee

and then attach 2004... who knows?

Conference Program
Nov 2000 Conference Program
Sep 2000 Conference Program
Jul 2000 Conference Program
May 2000 Conference Program
April 2000 Conference Program

PASTA

New Millennium
USHIRING IN THE

SYDNEY 2000
SRG CONFERENCE
1ST INTERNATIONAL
EXPRESSION OF INTEREST FORM
Australian SRCs to American Student Councils

Letters from Jenny Nam and her American host family

"Two roads diverged in a wood and I,
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference"

Robert Lee Frost

It is a pleasure to be amongst the first organised group of students and SRC Advisers to take the journey into the road ‘less travelled’. The journey - thousand of miles across the ocean to America - is a large stride into encouraging and fostering the advancement of international understanding and training of leadership among youth. This step is an inspiration to no longer view leadership among youth as a potential in our community but as an asset.

This opportunity to broaden my experience and have greater involvement in leadership was approached with great enthusiasm. Unfortunately, this is not shared by a few in the community. The greatest trouble I had in preparing for the trip was finding community organisations and people to readily sponsor me for the American tour. Often it would take more than two months to get a reply from organisations and sometimes the reply was not of success. With the quote that “Rome was not conquered in one day” in mind, I continue to persist and in conjunction with James am still attempting to find more sponsors. Though money is an issue for being part of the American trip, I feel that enthusiasm and a willingness to take part in the tour is the actual fuel: the fuel that gives you persistence - despite some organisations turning down sponsorship.

In preparation for the American Tour, we had a meeting on the 18th April at Leichhardt (in Sydney) which gave us the opportunity to be acquainted with the other students and advisers taking part in the American tour. During this meeting we were provided with an insight into America and the tour. It was astonishing for those with little knowledge of America, to be exposed to the American etiquette. For example, did you realise that it was considered rude to ask for the ‘toilet’. It is more appropriate to call the toilet a ‘bathroom’. Also, the list of probable questions that American students may ask us shocked us, and we found ourselves needing to do a little research into Australia ourselves. All in all, the meeting provided a fantastic informative meeting. I know many questions that had lingered in our minds were at last put to rest. There will also be a weekend, overnight meeting at Bathurst on the 6-7 June and this will be the last for us before we board the plane.

Meantime, many of us are starting to pack (trying hard to keep to the limit of 20 kg) and contacting our host families with whom we will be staying while attending the National Leadership Conference in Kansas. Just recently I received an e-mail from my host family and have replied them... I can’t wait to meet them!

As the days are numbered and the American tour approaches, tension and excitement heightens in the air... the phone is hot from ringing, a bomb seems to have hit the bedroom, the suitcase is overflowing, teachers at school are hassled for the study programs...

AMERICA HERE WE COME!
To all those involved/or willing to be involved in leadership... take the time now to apply for the 1999 Leadership Tour. If you don’t, you will regret it!

Jenny Nam

PS If you have any questions for the Americans concerning leadership, please forward them to Ken Page and he will be more than happy to ask on your behalf.

The following is an e-mail from my host family:

We are so glad you are coming to Kansas and happy to have you stay with us while you are here. You and Hollie Gravener (we don’t have an email address for her) will be with our family during your visit to Kansas. We have a guest bedroom in our basement with a bathroom, small kitchen area and family room. There is also a swimming pool in our backyard that ranges from 3 ft to 5 ft in depth. That tells you a little bit about the facilities. Now here’s a little bit about our family.

There are four of us in our family. Mom is a teacher. Her name is Charla (pronounced: Share). Dad works at Boeing and his name is Ron. Cindy is our daughter and our son is Allen. Cindy is 15 and will be helping at the conference. Allen is 13 and will be playing baseball or video games. We also have a dog and cat so if you are allergic or prefer not to have animals around, please let us know and we will be sure they stay outside.

The temperature outside will be warm, anywhere from 80-100 F (about 27-38 C). But the air conditioning can sometimes get pretty cool in the High School where you will be meeting so bring a sweater or jacket with you. Don’t worry, if you forget something or need something when you get here, we’ll see you have whatever you need.

If your family feels the need to get in touch with you, we have an e-mail address you are welcome to use anytime.

Looking forward to meeting you!

June 1998
West Bathurst Public primary students are currently communicating through e-mail and writing lots of letters to their 'elementary' school counterparts in Derby, Kansas in the United States.

Five Bathurst High School SRC leaders - Monique Field and Rebecca Fry from Year 10 and Stephanie Young, Kate McKeown and Catherine Sutter from Year 11 - will next month be representing Australian students internationally.

What's the connection?

The five high school leaders visited Eucalypt 1 - Mrs O’Rourke’s Year 3/4 class - last week to tell them about their upcoming SRC trip to the USA. From 24 June to 18 July this year, these students are part of a group of 30 high school SRC leaders from around Australia involved in the first-ever SRC 'tour' of the United States of America. No other school in the country has more than two such representatives. The girls told the primary students that the main purpose of their trip is to attend this year’s National SRC Conference organised by NASC, the National Association of Student Councils and Derby High School in the Derby/Wichita area of Kansas. There will be 2000 student SRC leaders and their advisers at this Conference.

So where does Year 3/4 come in?

Well, the organisers in Derby have arranged to have many different primary age classes there to be responsible for decorating “State Rooms”. Every state in the USA has been given their own room to meet in at various times during the Conference. Puerto Rico, Canada and now, for the very first time Australia, will also be given a room full of items which identify where they come from.

West Bathurst Year 3/4 Eucalypt 1 class is not only talking on-line and sending letters and photos to Mrs Paulin’s Year 2/3 class at El Paso Elementary School in Derby, Kansas. About a month ago they received a heap of photos and letters from them - the first letters that the USA kids had ever written.

The students in America wanted to know all about kangaroos and lots of other things so that they could do a good job of setting up Australia’s “State Room”. Some of them will also be at parts of the high school SRC Conference to meet our local girls. In addition, the Bathurst High students will take with them 'Rupert', the small teddy bear who travels all over the world with his diary and is hosted by various classes who keep a record of the things happening while he is with them. Though Rupert has been to Kansas before, this will be the first time he has actually toured with Australian students and with luck and good organisation on their part, may even be introduced on stage to all 2000 SRC delegates to the Conference.

The Bathurst West students are eagerly awaiting more replies from Kansas and will be on-line daily while the high school students send messages back from the states during their trip. Further information about this SRC leadership tour, future such tours and the first ever International SRC Conference in Sydney in 2000 can be obtained from Charles Kingston or Peter Street at Bathurst High School.
INTERNATIONAL PARTICIPATION:
AN EDUCATION IN LEADERSHIP

This is the first year in the 67 year history of the Student Council movement in the USA that an Australian group is participating. The activities are supported by NASSP, the National Association of Secondary School Principals in the USA and the trip is being organised by PASTA, the Professional Association of SRC Teacher Advisers (in Australia). It is the first of what will be an unique annual opportunity to develop and promote the many valuable curriculum aspects of SRCs and student activities.

While the main purpose of the trip is to attend the 62nd National SRC Conference organised by NASC, the National Association of Student Councils and Derby High School in the Wichita area of Kansas, our students are also attending one of two separate week long National Leadership Training Camps run by NASC as well as undertaking travel in various Western USA states.

Some 1500 students and 500 SRC Activity Advisers from all USA states, Canada and Puerto Rico attend the Conference. Amongst other things, our group will be making a major presentation in front of all 2000 participants at the Derby Conference promoting the 2000 Olympics and the Paralympics and inviting people to come ‘down under’ during that time to be part of the first ever International SRC Conference that PASTA is organising.

Of most value in the long run, however, should be the leadership skills development that occurs during the camps two weeks later. Our students are splitting into two groups and joining some 200 others from various parts of the USA and Canada to spend a week at either Outlaw Ranch in South Dakota or at Lake Tahoe in Nevada/California.

The curriculum of these camps focuses on communication skills, project planning, meeting skills, leadership development and organisational techniques. They provide participants with an opportunity to acquire leadership skills and experience personal growth, enabling them to serve successfully in their leadership and representational positions. The camps address multicultural awareness, conflict resolution and the following skill areas: goal setting; organisation, effective meetings, time management and planning; group process, team building and behaviour observations; problem solving, decision making, styles of leadership and needs analysis; communication; evaluation; self-awareness and motivation.

Our Australian students are attending the camps for senior high schools students (Years 10-12) but NASC also runs middle level camps for Years 7-9 and it is hoped that our future trips will enable some younger students to attend these.

SPONSOR A STUDENT:
HELP LEAD THE NATION

The 30 students taking part in the 1998 PASTA organised SRC leadership tour of the United States have been very very busy attempting to raise the necessary funds to get them there. They and PASTA are intensely appreciative of the sponsorship support provided so far and intend to publish and promote in a variety of ways those who have given it.

Likewise, we intend to publish in Connect some of the innovative ways in which the students have managed to fundraise for this unique experience. One that stands out so far is the example of Jay Ryan from Walgett High in NSW. With the help of his father, who owns a truck, Jay advertised locally for scrap metal and was able to collect enough to then take it to Newcastle to sell, raising thereby fully half of the money needed for his trip.

We also trust that others will follow the example set by Bathurst High School in NSW, which has five students going on this inaugural trip. It has vowed to continue to seek the necessary funds (in their case, $25,000 so that all five can go) until the base cost to the families concerned has been covered. The efforts will continue until well after the students have returned, opening up the very real possibility that the students can effectively share the wonderful results of their experience in return for such support.

It is hoped that many individuals, service clubs, businesses and corporations will take the opportunity to be part of this exciting project, whether through assisting the Bathurst effort, supplementing funds already raised by the student going from your area or making a firm commitment now to support whoever is chosen to go in 1999 or future annual trips.

The Bathurst parent/student/staff group has established for this purpose a number of levels of sponsorship available. A ‘gold’ sponsor is available for the full sponsorship of costs for one student ($5,000 in 1998 rising to $6,000 in 1999 because of the decline in value of the Australian dollar). This level offers the right to have company logos worn (on T-Shirts etc) by all members of this trip (30 this year, up to 50 annually) while in the USA, advertising for the company using students, parents and staff to promote your business, national accreditation as a sponsor, presentation of a sponsorship plaque and any other reasonable requests for 12 months.

A ‘silver’ sponsor is for contributions over $500 but less than full sponsorship. This will entitle the sponsor to advertising during the year using students, parents and staff, promotional right for that year as well as the presentation of a sponsorship plaque.

A ‘bronze’ sponsor is for sponsorship up to $500 or donations of materials. These sponsors will be entitled to advertising during the year and a sponsors certificate.
Imagine students who represent all parts of our multicultural society - from Indigenous to Asian to Middle Eastern to Orthodox Jewish to African backgrounds - sitting together with their fellow students from all three school systems to extend their understanding of and then to debate and even act out the issues surrounding racism with one another and with experts in the field. Now imagine them writing original music or poetry together, or designing creative movement or works of art to express their own feelings, in the process being inspired by one another to bring back to their schools and communities a number of creative and constructive ideas on ways in which we can together address those acts and attitudes which undermine the dignity and worth of all humanity!

These are the scenes we witnessed at our seminar on racism for senior secondary students on Sunday 10 August, 1997, and which are described in more detail in the following section. Almost seventy young people met together at Deakin University in Geelong, led by secondary and tertiary student members of The Shaping Tomorrow Today Association. This venue was selected by our student members, many of whom are from Victorian rural areas, because they felt that it was important that rural students are given the opportunity to have major events in their own areas.

THE SEMINAR - AN UNFORGETTABLE DAY!

The foyer was buzzing with chatter as the students congregated to register for the day. Many had already met on our 'Community Bus', which collected them at Spencer Street Station in Melbourne. Wearing their new badges which proclaimed Racism Gets Under Our Skin, they filed in to be greeted by music resounding throughout the darkened lecture theatre - and images flashing on the screen - lonely people - forgotten people - angry people - all victims of some form of racism!

After participants were welcomed by two of our student leaders, our keynote speaker, Basil Varghese of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, spoke passionately about the origins and impact of racism. This address was unforgettable, as Basil not only placed racism in its historical context but, even more importantly, shared something of his own wisdom and humanity and humility, touching our own souls in the process. United by this profound and moving experience, we were no longer strangers, and so morning tea was a time of very animated discussion and debate.

'I found the keynote speaker, Basil Varghese, absolutely wonderful. He offered inspiration and hope, which was fantastic. His speech was very touching.'

'It made me search within myself and the world we live in.'

'He really seemed logical and realistic and spoke about racism the way it actually is. I learnt from him more than any other who has talked to me about racism.'

This spirit of togetherness was still there when we then watched a performance by WYPIN, a network of young migrant people from the western suburbs of Melbourne who also are committed to breaking down the barriers which operate in our Society and who have established a number of support programs in their area. Again, this was a moving and very personal experience as powerful images were conjured up before us. We ourselves could almost feel the panic of terrified children as their peaceful lives are shattered by war, their bewilderment as they flee to a land of strangers and strange ways, their pain as they cannot understand or be understood, as they are pushed away, taunted, isolated and alone, grieving the loss of all the richness of their own culture and traditions and the reassurance and affirmation...
of their own community, then torn between the old and the new, between family and friend.

'It showed so much feeling and real stories with descriptions I've never dreamed of. I was so touched and moved by them. I was almost in tears I felt so privileged that these people were sharing their lives with me.'

It was also there when the students then went off to share something of themselves with one another, and to reflect on all that they had just heard and experienced. And it was certainly there after lunch when we all participated in some hilarious activities followed by 'The Theatre of The Oppressed', directed by Bryan Derrick. In this theatre style, which originated in South America, a group of young players from four of our participating schools enacted a hypothetical scenario on racism which they had written together. They then began to act it again, except the audience joined in to change the story, trying to resolve some of the conflicts which they had witnessed. This proved to be a very powerful yet safe way to consider strategies individuals can use to confront racist behaviour.

'It made me realise that "fire cannot be fought with fire". Another structure needs to be taken when tackling racism "head-on". What good is it to overpower and dominate (in an aggressive way) people who are already aggressive and angry? As satisfying as it may feel, it does nothing to change a general attitude of aggression.'

Stirring music and mysterious thumping sounds from the closed theatre, artists and writers huddled over their sheets of paper, waiting for that moment of inspiration when their feelings would take form, public speakers discussing how they might have a lasting impact on their audience, musicians frantically writing their lyrics and experimenting with the keyboard. Only an hour and a half and they would have to present their endeavours to everyone ... 15 minutes .. 10 minutes .. warning calls .. the pressure mounted!! Then it was time, and the presentations of the Action Groups in our Final Ceremony were unforgettable.

We walked into the theatre past the works of art created by a number of participants, powerful symbols of the human spirit, in its time of rejection and loneliness, or of an inward private journey, or of the forces which hold us apart, or of reaching out beyond ourselves, towards our dreams and ideals.

Their audience now silenced by the passion in those simple artistic strokes, the Creative Movement Action Group then left us stunned - replaying the music of our Opening, yet taking it beyond our imagination, using light and movement in a most powerful way, to portray our separateness and togetherness, celebrating our shared humanity and the heights we can reach together. A hard act to follow! And yet it was followed by equally compelling expression of the deep feelings of all of our participants - through their creative writing, their music and the raising of voices across the theatre challenging us to go out and refuse to be silent, until the ugly and dehumanising voice of racism itself is silenced.

'I was amazed at the quality of work produced as a result of the culmination of so many beliefs, ideas, influences and inspirations - and all within one and a half hours!'

'... the reality they portrayed was so clear, that I am now even more inspired to use my voice to help those who have lost theirs!'

THE PARTICIPANTS

When we read the application forms of our participants, we were almost moved to tears. Many had already experienced racism at first hand, as a refugee or migrant, or as one of our indigenous peoples. They came from Queensland, NSW and rural and urban Victoria. We were all enriched and inspired by their passionate wish to extend their knowledge, to share their diverse backgrounds, experiences, talents and insights, and to be empowered to go out and help free our Society of the kind of injustice and damage caused by racism.

'Racism isn't just an issue I see on television or hear people comment on. It's something that I've lived with. I remember comments being hurled out of car windows when Mum used to walk me to school in the morning. It amazed me how Mum would just continue walking, not fazed by people's remarks. I asked Mum one day why people hated her so much. She smiled, "Don't worry, they're just scared. That's all." I'd wonder sometimes how anyone could be afraid of my Mum, lanky, frail, born-by-life, Mum.' (Conference participant)

The three main reasons for attending given by the participants were:

- A shared concern about the way racism undermines human dignity as well as basic human rights, and they wanted their voices to be heard. This was an opportunity to do so constructively, and using their own gifts and talents.
- They saw themselves as the future leaders of this country and wished to be better informed about such key issues and to begin to take action now to shape the kind of Society they wish to lead them.
- They believed that their education should include discussion and debate about life issues such as racism.

'I would like the opportunity to participate in this seminar, because as a young Koori female, I believe that multi-culturalism is a positive aspect and should not be regarded as a negative. The only way to keep it positive is to educate and keep educating people on multi-culturalism and over time phase out racism altogether. I would love the privilege to hear other young Australians as "we are the future".'
OUTCOMES

These have included:

- Greater understanding of racism - its origins and its impact on individuals.
- Many participants have established links with students from other schools. We have reports of the exchange of e-mail and letters across the country, and a number have now joined our network which operates across Australia and have applied to join our Action Committee for our 1998 national residential conference.
- Greater self-awareness and self-confidence.
- Follow-up seminars or addressing their School Assembly or informing their Social Justice Group and inspiring and guiding its response to racism. For example, we have had a report from one participant who has enthusiastically publicised our work against racism amongst the students as they ask her about ‘our’ badge, and has now been elected Social Justice Captain of her school for next year. She has already organised for Basil Varghese to address students and staff Term 4, 1997, and wishes to involve her school in helping organise our next conference.
- Motivation and inspiration, leading to increased individual contributions to schools and local communities.
- The production of music and creative writing and journalistic articles, all on the theme of racism, which were read out to all participants.

HOW COULD SO MUCH BE ACHIEVED IN ONE DAY?

A hallmark of our seminar on racism, as with all of our events, was the leading part played by student members of the Association, who not only helped plan and organise the conference but also introduced all sessions, led discussion groups and helped to create an atmosphere of challenge, excitement, confidence and hope. It is part of our philosophy that students must be given real leadership opportunities and times in which they can share together their beliefs and dreams, experiences, values and opinions in an open, accepting, inclusive and supportive environment without a teacher present.

To a great extent it was through the enthusiastic support of our student leaders that a spirit of togetherness among all participants was soon established. Moreover, the positive example, commitment and insight played a large part in giving all participants the inspiration, encouragement, support and empowerment to establish new initiatives back at their schools, to be much more aware of and to speak out against racism in their day-to-day interactions, and to raise their voice on behalf of those who have no voice.

Our participants came from all three school systems across Australia, from rural and metropolitan areas, from very diverse cultural, religious and socio-economic backgrounds. We believe that ensuring that we brought together such a diversity of young people, and holding our seminar at a tertiary venue, enabled them to realise that if we are to effectively address this issue, then we must build on and yet transcend all of our diverse experiences and values, and work together in partnership. Also the setting demonstrated that we regarded them as mature young adults. Similarly the meals, which were catered for by the University, were of the standard that we would provide at an adult conference. This helped to reinforce our respect for our participants, and promote the sense of togetherness and sharing.

One cannot measure, of course, the full impact of an experience such as this day on those who were there. However, a number of the schools which participated in our Poverty Conference have reported that their students came back inspired and empowered, stating that it had been a ‘life-changing experience’. Many of these students have now set up major initiatives in their schools, and have become more active in social justice issues and in the community and Church programs which work in some way in the field of poverty. As we receive reports back from the schools involved in the seminar, even though it was a much shorter event, a similar story is emerging. These indeed were not merely ‘talk-fests’, but real experiences with real and enduring change.

One teacher present did express concern that we were “preaching to the converted”. On hearing this, two of our participants disagreed most vehemently. One commented that whilst she had not agreed with racism, it was through our seminar that she realised that she had been too detached - the problem had not touched her personally. As a result of the experiences of this day, she realised that it was her problem, and she felt that she was not only better informed about racism but also inspired to set up seminar at her school so that the issue could be tackled there.

‘Basil’s speech and watching the creative movement group touched me. Basil so deeply because he spoke from the heart and the movement group because I helped lead them and it was powerful to see the group working and relying on each other.’

‘Being involved in the Creative Writing Action Group was really great, as you got to know people through the words they expressed. Being a facilitator in our discussion group was really great and just being able to express my opinions and hear other peoples was a great experience. The Finale was really awesome and inspiring as we saw the day come together.’

‘I thought the conference was really well organised and planned. The activities were fantastic, because they were all so different. I have made new friends from this and the food was unreal! Thank you so much on a sensational day. I learnt so much and will pass this on to others. If there is another seminar like this next year, I would love to be there!’ (Participant)
Drugs Exist: Know the Risk!

NSW SRC State Conference Report 1997

Each year, the New South Wales State SRC holds a statewide student conference. The 11th Conference was held at Vision Valley, Arcadia, from 5-8 August 1997. 120 students in years 9 to 12 from the 40 NSW Department of Education and Training districts attended.

Three student representatives from each district were elected from their district SRC networks to attend the Conference. The conference was organised by the State SRC Conference Working Party - 20 students elected at district forums. Each represented two geographically paired districts. The Working Party was assisted by Rod Batkin (Wollongong District SRC teacher/adviser coordinator) and Julie Leslie (Taree District SRC teacher/adviser coordinator), and was convened by Stuart Hearne (Senior Education Officer - Student Leadership and SRC).

The theme for 1997 was 'Drugs Exist: Know the Risk!', and two sub-themes of 'Drug Education' and 'Student Leadership' were used to structure speakers, workshops, discussion groups and student forums. At the Conference, students considered strategies that they could adopt for their leadership programs within the district networks, and also gained confidence in developing these strategies within their own schools. Students were also asked to go back to their districts and schools to continue the drug education theme. Many plan to use the title 'Drugs Exist: Know the Risk!' at district SRC activity days and conferences.

An evaluation report of the Conference has been prepared by Lea Baltovska (Berkeley High School) and Rod Batkin. This has now been published by the NSW Department of Education and Training.

For more information, contact:

Stuart Hearne
Student Welfare Directorate
NSW Department of School Education
Private Bag 3
Ryde NSW 2112
Phone: (02) 9886 7450; Fax: (02) 9808 9543

We wish to extend our thanks to the Queen’s Trust, whose Award made this seminar possible.

Jenny Sharwood

For further enquiries, please contact Jenny at:
1/4 Sweyn Street, Balwyn North, VIC, 3104
Phone/fax: (03) 9816 3786

"I found it a most uplifting experience to watch young people have fun together, show great leadership, marvellous creativity and such sensitivity for those suffering oppression from racism." (Principal)

"... I was both surprised and impressed to witness the degree of maturity with which attending students approached the day... Students did not merely passively respond to the events of the day; they were actively encouraged to contribute and question the proceedings. This was achieved through student-directed small discussion groups, and action groups, where participants drew upon the insights they had gained to imaginatively respond to the problem of racism. The variety and complexity of these outstanding presentations was indicative of the breadth and depth of knowledge they had gleaned. Most inspiring was the affirmative action students vowed to take, of their own accord, when they returned to their school communities. In all, the day was a resounding success and testimony to the ability of secondary students, our future leaders, to unite and develop workable solutions to topical issues." (Student organiser)

"As Australians, we have a national and social responsibility to gnaw away at racism until we come to its very core, just as Varghese did, and accept that we live in a multicultural country that is not a melting pot of many wonderful cultures, but a salad bowl!" (Bronwyn Mayrick, Smith's Hill High School, Wollongong, NSW)
Why Have an SRC Constitution?

How do you run a proper election? How do you remove a President? In short, what rules govern your Student Council?

If you don’t have the answers written down on paper in a formal document, then the rules of the Student Council are left up to custom. Is it really such a good idea to leave only the experienced people knowing the proper procedures? Worse still, doesn’t it give teachers an opportunity to manipulate the Student Council?

A constitution, or ‘code of conduct’, is the document that sets out these rules so they can be observed and referred to in later years. It can also protect against schools robbing the students of their rights. As every Student Council or Union is different, it is up to the individual Councils to tailor-make their constitution to best suit the way they function. However, there are some general things to consider.

Having decided you need to create a constitution, or revise an existing one, the best thing to do is stage your very own Constitutional Convention. Here you can discuss all the items you need to put into the constitution, remembering to be careful over wording each clause. Clarity is very important as future years must understand this document too. Bear in mind that you are writing a constitution with the intention of it being permanent.

Start with a General Definitions section; here you will outline the exact name of the Council, how it is composed and what its job is. If there are any specific terms you will refer to that are not generally used outside the Council, then they also need to be defined here.

Elections are often a point of contention amongst students, so a strict procedure for elections to the Council must be set out. Each point should follow in a logical order, i.e. don’t explain voting before dealing with nominations. For example:

"Electoral procedure"

1. The SRC is to determine the dates of nomination periods and elections in conjunction with the relevant school administration.
2. The SRC is responsible for conducting SRC elections and all relevant details.
3. The SRC will determine, prior to the opening of the nomination period, the number of positions to be filled in the relevant year level." And so on.

What is the internal structure of the SRC? This needs to be clearly set out and explained. How do you elect the President? Who has voting rights? Do you form an Executive? Other positions on the SRC? How often are meetings and who decides when?

The roles and responsibilities of an SRC member need to be outlined in detail, so that the members know what is expected of them at all times. In particular, the leaders of the SRC need to have their role identified and their powers defined. It is very important to control the amount of power given to any one person, assuming they are going to be democratic.

Finance and equipment may require specific attention, regarding how funds may be spent and so on. Do you need a fund-raising policy? Traditional activities.

What if someone breaks these conditions? What sort of action can be carried out against that person? Without a written document to specify this, many SRCs have fallen into the trap, where one person, often a teacher, kicks people off the SRC purely because they don’t like them, or because they hold different views. A constitution needs to define what actions are considered detriment to the SRC and what can the SRC do about it.

If you leave out any other section, do not forget this one: A constitution absolutely must have a clause that outlines the procedure for making alterations to it. In ten years time when things have changed, the rule may have to change and grow too. By the same token, you want to ensure that any change made is not just for the sake of making a change. It’s not easy to change the Australian Constitution. Everyone should know about the proposed change well in advance, and it should probably require more than just 50% of the SRC to agree with it. For example:

"The Constitution of the Balwyn High School Student Representative Council, may have additions or alteration made to sections of it, or clauses removed, by having an absolute majority vote in favour of the change." NB: An absolute majority refers to two-thirds of the SRC.

If you want to get fancy, you could consider adding a Vision Statement at the beginning of the document which is very useful for keeping the SRC on track and avoids becoming free labour for teachers.

Before final approval of the whole SRC, have you considered all the areas relevant to your Council? What would happen if the President abdicates his/her position? Consider putting in a clause to safeguard against this and any other catastrophic possibilities that could occur. Don’t go overboard, but it pays to be prepared.

From the brief examples you can see that the constitution will end up being a long document, and often very boring, as there is a lot to think about and the wording will often be difficult. In my opinion, though, it is absolutely necessary and I think that you will find it worthwhile.

David Mould
SRC President
Balwyn High School, Vic
(Examples in this article come from the Balwyn High School SRC Constitution, Victoria.)
Local and Overseas Publications Received

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STUDENT PUBLICATIONS:

Australian:
Mercury (Eltham HS, Vic) 1997
Pharos (Clarence HS, Tas) 1996, 1997
State Conference Report: Drugs Exist - Know the Risk! (NSW State SRC) August 1997
State SRC Minutes (NSW State SRC) 20 March 1998

OTHER PUBLICATIONS:

Australian:
ACER Newsletter (ACER, Vic) No. 91, Autumn 1998
Annual Report (Network of Community Activities, Surry Hills, NSW) 1997
Education Alternatives (Caulfield East, Vic) Vol 7 Nos 2, 3, 4 (April, May, June 1998)
Linking and Thinking Health (Australian Health Promoting Schools Association, Sydney, NSW) Vol 5 No 1 February/March 1998
Other Ways (Alternative Education Resource Group, Chirnside Park, Vic) Issue 76, June 1998
Rights Now! (National Children's and Youth Law Centre, NSW) April 1998
Starlink (Melbourne, Vic) Issue 26; April 1998
STTA Newsletter (The Shaping Tomorrow Today Association, Inc, Vic) April 1998
Thinktank (Youth Affairs Council of Victoria, Fitzroy, Vic) Vol 1 No 1, May 1998
'What's the point?' - political attitudes of Victorian Year 11 students (Suzanne Mellor, ACER, Vic) Research Monograph 53
YACSAround (YACSA, Adelaide, SA) May/June 1998

Overseas:

Communication Research Trends (St Louis, USA) Vol 17 (1997) No 2
Democracy & Education (Athens, Ohio, USA) Vol 12 No 2, Winter/Spring 1998
Leadership (NASSP, USA) April 1998
National Coalition News (NCACS, New Mexico, USA) Vol 23, No 1; Summer 1998

Documents

The documents listed in this column are of general background value. A photocopy is available for research purposes. The length and cost (to cover copying and postage) is listed. Please order by code number.

A full, computerised index of these documents is now available from Connect for $3; this can be accessed and printed by topic, key-word etc or simply sequentially.

Code Description/Pages/Cost

447 State Conference Report: Drugs Exist - Know the Risks (NSW State SRC Conference, August 1997)
(8 pp: $1.00)

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- Democratic Decision Making in Schools - Victorian PEP (1987) ($3)
- SRC Pamphlets Set (6 pamphlets; Youth Affairs Council of Vic) ($5)
- Democracy Starts Here! Junior School Councils at Work (1996) ($7)

**Foxfire Resources:**

- Sometimes a Shining Moment (Wigginton) ($25)
- Foxfire 9 (Doubleday Anchor) ($25)
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