Participation develops:

Engagement ... Hope ... Optimism... Enthusiasm ...

- Investigating Engagement: reflections and evaluations of a Student Action Team
- VicSRC: Regional Conferences, Rural Ambassadors, VCAL & Principals
- Class Captains: Representative or Responsible?
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This Issue:

Welcome back for another school year. This will be Connect’s 33rd year, and will bring us close to 200 issues by the end of the year. I’m thinking that that might mark a point (in 2013) at which we review how Connect comes to you – perhaps it’s time to go totally on-line. What do you think? Are you still interested to read about participatory practices in primary and secondary schools? Would you do so if it meant downloading your own copy of Connect - for free - rather than having a print copy mailed to you?

Already most Connect back issues are now available for free via the Connect/ACER website. Please visit it (see address on page 28) and download any issues of interest.

While you’re there, have a look again at Professor Ken Polk’s address on Hope way back in Connect 21 (June 1983: pages 28-30). I was reminded of it, and hunted it out, after seeing the photograph on the front cover of this issue, and noting the enthusiasm, enjoyment and optimism expressed by students at last year’s VicSRC Congress.

Yet this enjoyment can be contrasted to prevailing concerns with many students’ disengagement from school.

Ken wrote in 1983: “A funny thing happens when people think they are powerless. They stop acting. If you believe that what you do doesn’t make any difference, there is no sense in doing it. One of the most tragic things that happens to a lot of students is that they get the message, correctly or incorrectly, that there is no hope. If there is no hope, there is no reason, and if there is no reason, there is no action. They become consequently apathetic, unmotivated, with apparently low educational aptitudes.

“The intriguing thing is that this is what we teach kids. The way you can demonstrate this is to reverse the process and allow young people to participate. In some of these programs that we might call ‘youth development’ or ‘youth participation’ projects, you can see students change almost overnight and become very active, hopeful and confident young people.”

Go back and read this talk and look at the practical examples that Ken then provides. The amazing ... and perhaps tragic ... thing is that these comments (and examples) remain as true and relevant today as they were in 1983.

Connect remains committed to sharing stories of hope and optimism, but also to challenging schools, teachers, students and others to reflect on successes in building that and to focus on sharing what works.

The stories in this issue do that. The outcomes of Student Councils, Student Action Teams and other similar initiatives provide practical proof that learning and teaching can be purposeful, productive and engaging.

Roger Holdsworth

Next Issue: #194-5: April-June 2012
Deadline for material: end of March, 2012

Cover:

All of that at the 2011 VicSRC Annual Congress

Why does Connect exist?

Connect has been published bi-monthly since 1979.

It aims to:
• document student participation approaches and initiatives;
• support reflective practices;
• develop and share resources.

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During 2011, several Student Action Teams involved students in investigating what ‘school engagement’ means, what affects engagement, and what changes could be made to improve engagement. Some of these have worked with ‘whole cohorts’ of students, including both students who were initially engaged and disengaged.

Descriptions of the work of some of these Teams was included in Connect 189 (June 2011). In particular, the report of the work of Grade 5 and 6 students from St Charles Borromeo Primary School in Templestowe, Victoria, outlined the initial stages of discussion by students about the meaning of engagement and the beginning of research that they were undertaking about issues that shaped engagement.

The articles on the next few pages present various aspects of this project. They start with a reflection on the process from one of the Grade 5-6 teachers (pages 3 to 8), including a summary of the steps taken by these 48 students through 2011 (page 4), and followed by a report of student and teacher evaluations of the Student Action Team (pages 9 to 13).

Investigating Engagement

Between the years 2005 and 2009, our school was incredibly fortunate to have been selected to be a participant in the Values Education Good Practice in School’s Project. We focused on ‘Listening to the Student Voice in Improving Teaching, Learning and School Culture in Values Education’ through the implementation of a Student Action Team. The students involved in this process made profound and significant changes to the school as a result of their research and team work, all of which has continued to flourish within the school years later. Many of the students involved in the SAT were shown to have an improved ‘sense of self’ which also meant seeing an increase in their self esteem and resilience when faced with set backs both during and after the project.

Comparing our school’s data from 2007, during the period that SATs were a central focus for the senior school’s learning, to our recent data, shows a significant decrease in the level of Student Engagement. Staff who worked with the students during this time also support the difference in engagement to learning and enthusiasm in the classroom when comparing previous observations to more recent ones. This has been a cause for concern amongst all stakeholders.

In 2011, the school decided to re-introduce Student Action Teams (SATs) into the senior curriculum and used this method to investigate effective teaching practices that engage our students. Running parallel to this was the aim that we would increase the engagement level of the current senior students through the process of SATs.

In the following pages, I want to show some of the outcomes of this approach. These indicate that SATs enhance the engagement of students when the activities are centred on action and movement; it is important to limit the amount of theory and ‘talking at’ time. Allocating specific roles to students within their teams creates responsibility and assists us to ensure that all students participate. Using a SAT to investigate positive engagement strategies provides an excellent insight into the opinions of students in a non-threatening manner.

Providing the students with the opportunity to have their voices heard is a rewarding experience and essential to school improvement. It lets the students know that they are valued. However, one must be aware of the anxiety that this may cause to some staff members. A supportive yet assertive approach is essential to the success of the process.

Starting Off

Observing the students during the initial process of determining roles and teams proved to be rewarding. Their enthusiasm and engagement was evident through their participation in the discussion and debate. We found it was not just the more vocal students of the level who had strong feelings about the roles but also those who would otherwise stay quiet or were disengaged. This was an important observation, as research has suggested that the most disengaged students are least likely to be heard.

Unfortunately this engagement and enthusiasm did not continue throughout the first Engagement Event. We were shocked and disappointed with the response of the students at the end of the first forum when they were asked to plot themselves on a human scale demonstrating how they felt about the project. A small number of students...
Student Action Team Stages:
Two Grade 5-6 classes and their two teachers were involved in this Student Action Team. These are the stages through which the project moved during the year.

**Preparation of Teams:**
To prepare the students for working within teams in the project, we discussed cooperative groups and the roles required for each group to function at its best. The students identified six roles within teams:

1. **Team Leader:** keeps the group on task; encourages participation of all members; maintains group’s focus on the tasks at hand
2. **Reporter/Speaker:** reads instructions and details; feeds back information to larger groups; reports at forums
3. **Writer/Scribe:** responsible for all note taking and scripting of data and information and drafting feedback; edits information for display
4. **Publisher:** creates posters for presentations and engagement measurement devices; responsible for design of work
5. **Materials:** collects materials needed for the group; returns folders and paperwork to the appropriate places
6. **Researcher:** collects and collates data and records; assists in analysing information collected; researches any facts needed

The students identified the roles in which their strengths lay to assist in the formation of eight SATs, each comprising of six students. Having 48 participants involved in the process meant that every student in the year level held a position of responsibility within a team and everyone would have a role to fulfill. We ensured that there was a mix of students from both classes in each team and a variety of ability levels. Group leaders were chosen based on their self-identification of leadership strength but we also selected some leaders based on our identification of them being particularly disengaged. This was done in the hope that these students would provide the greatest insight into why our students are disengaged by giving them the opportunity to express their beliefs in a productive way, whilst being responsible for a team of their peers.

**Engagement Event:**
The project started with an event in which all the students came together and were introduced to the topic being investigated. Here they began to discuss what engagement in learning and school meant, what it looked, felt and sounded like and what they believed could affect the level of engagement of the students at our school.

**Research Phase:**
After formulating these ideas into focus questions, students began to conduct research on their hypotheses across the school. Regular SAT sessions in the classroom occurred twice a week, with extra sessions added closer to the date of the forums. These sessions were included in the normal timetable formatted as two one-hour blocks. Team leaders also met on several occasions to discuss the process and progress.

From these discussions, students were challenged to think about what ‘engagement’ meant to other students in the school. The teams visited different classrooms across the school to listen to these students, and to learn how ideas about engagement could be presented in ‘kid-speak’. This led them to develop various physical models of engagement that made sense to various student levels – and they built these models: stairs, trees, dinosaurs etc.

Using these models as research tools, the student teams then chose a particular method of data collection relevant to their assigned year level. They designed surveys, interviews and observations, began gathering data that related to their focus question, and then learnt how to analyse the results.

**Research Reporting Event:**
The information from their data analysis was presented as a display poster for a second forum in order to share their findings. This Forum also started a process of teams developed statements of visions and changes for school practices around engagement.

**Action Phase:**
From their visions and change statements, the teams developed action proposals and began to put these plans into action. The eight groups came up with proposals in the following areas:

- Working with a Prep class, Team 1 suggested developing a **structured system of rewards** for student engagement.
- Team 2 also worked with a Prep class, and developed **Art-based activities** to increase their engagement. Team 3 similarly developed **physical activities** with their Grade 1-2 class, and Team 4 developed a **program of sports activities** across the year level.
- Team 5 investigated the impact of having **breakfast** or not with Grade 1-2 students, discovered that a very small group of students did not eat breakfast and began action to emphasise the importance of this to engagement, in communication with parents. Similarly, Team 6 investigated the importance of **healthy foods** to engagement (in grade 3-4) and started a student-led publicity campaign across the school.
- Team 7 looked at the involvement of students in **choosing activities within the classroom** and began discussing this with staff, while Team 8 looked specifically at the **nature of classroom activities** in Grade 5-6 that were engaging and finally focused on arts-based activities within the Religion area (see the more detailed case study from the teacher).

**Action Reporting Event:**
All teams reported on their action plans and achievements to date in a final forum, attended by the Principal and their teachers. To some extent, all actions are incomplete, and this final Forum spent some time planning ways in which the Grade 5 students, who would be Grade 6 students in 2012, could take responsibility for maintaining implementation.
expressed enthusiasm and looked forward to the work, a slightly larger percentage positioned themselves in the ‘half/half’ category but the largest percentage stated that they were ‘not interested’.

Having worked with teams in the past who have been ecstatic at the opportunity to become involved in the process and seeing their joy when they achieve the goal of creating change, I knew how valuable and exciting the strategy could be. When we first witnessed the negative attitudes of the students, I suffered from a combination of defeat and anger. At this time I found that I was asking myself ‘why do we even bother?’ We discussed changing the project to just include the students who were interested in participating [but] decided against [this] as it was from the most disengaged that we needed to hear; to run the SATs with only the engaged students would defeat the purpose of the exercise.

The students also expressed a view that they were still unsure of what would be involved in the project, and its outcomes and purposes. We then took time to explain the process of how the project came to fruition to the students, starting with the survey data they had provided to the school in 2010. We also shared some undertakings and actions that had been implemented by previous Student Action Teams at the school and ended by describing the process in greater detail. At the end of this discussion we asked the students to plot themselves again and the results were slightly improved with only a small number of students expressing ‘no interest’, most students having moved into ‘half/half’. The students who remained in the ‘no interest’ category for a second time were students that we had identified as being particularly disengaged. At this point of the project we decided to give them more time to become involved in the activities in order to see if their attitude towards the project shifted.

Doing Research

As time progressed we saw a positive shift in the attitudes of the students towards SAT sessions in the classroom. The shift occurred when the focus of the project moved beyond the theory component – what engagement looks/ sounds and feels like – and into the research phase which involved more physical activities, hands-on work and the opportunity to visit other classrooms and work with students across the school. They showed more passion towards the project, and this was evident through their discussions, questions and presentations during feedback sessions. We saw that most students remained focused on their group tasks for a greater percentage of time when compared to ‘normal’ class work and were proactive in working with their team members to complete tasks. Conversations that took place amongst group members were relevant to the topic most of the time and they would approach teachers with questions to ensure understanding or to deepen their knowledge of a topic. One staff member noted how encouraging it was to see one particularly disengaged student, who was regularly disruptive during class, become involved with the project and cooperate effectively with his group. A Year 5 student commented that: “last term in SAT I was not engaged, but this term I feel really engaged”.

Outcomes from the Research Phase

The observable shift in the students’ engagement during sessions was most evident during times in which students were working on a problem or task that required creativity, movement and especially when working with their team. Any time students were assembled as a whole to explain a step or procedure, the level of engagement decreased at a greater rate than when they worked in their teams. This indicated to me that we needed to ensure that the maximum amount of their time was spent on task work and on activities that required the students to work in their teams. It was important to keep any whole group teaching time to a minimum and provided extra support to the teams on an individual basis.

Whilst most classroom teachers were accommodating and flexible in allowing the students into the classrooms to undertake discussions and research, we found that some staff were concerned about the students ‘interrupting class time’. If the students reported that they were having difficulty in setting times with teachers, I encouraged them to respectfully negotiate with the staff member, as the onus was on the students to organise their timetables. I would rehearse ways in which this could take place with members of the teams as well as discussing how they best thought it could be handled. I only had to step in and talk directly to teachers on three occasions, and each time I received positive responses.

Being able to manage and alter the senior timetable proved to be a simpler process than I had originally thought. We were committed to making the process work and therefore we were able to change and adapt our regular structure to include regular weekly SAT sessions. We found that using encouragement and support to remind one another of our commitment helped us to stay on task and meeting regularly to discuss the process and future direction provided further incentive.

The most positive aspect of this project was witnessing the change in the engagement of the students as they moved further into the project. It was difficult to face the lack of interest that the children displayed given that it was something that we had given an incredible amount of time, energy and emotion to. To
Classroom strategies that enhance engagement

When we have Circle Time...

When we have free choice for Silent Reading...

When we use the eLearning Hub...

When we have Fruit Time...

When we do Physical based activities...

When we do Art based activities...

When we play Games...

When we have Personal Journal time...
witness a positive change in the students as they became engrossed in their projects was rewarding. It helped increase my energy, enthusiasm and hope for the project. I looked forward to SAT sessions in the classroom and when the students created their action plans, I felt confident that our aims have been successful.

Research into Action

During the research phase, I became aware that, whilst we were investigating engagement levels and causes across the school, we were not investigating the original target group: the Year 5-6 students. At this stage I approached one of the student teams and invited them to adapt their focus to finding out from their peers what worked best to engage the senior students. The team had originally chosen to work with the staff group but had discovered that this was proving to be difficult due to time constraints and availability of the part-time staff. They enthusiastically accepted the offer to change their focus and I began preliminary discussions on how we were to approach the task.

While the other groups continued to work on linking their research findings to implications for action, this group continued to gather data from their own class. The first stage of the process was to demonstrate to the group how to gather their data. To do this I led a brainstorming session with the group asking them to write down on strips of paper what works best to keep them engaged in their learning, and which strategies and activities help them to stay ‘switched on’ to their work. By focusing only on positive aspects of engagement, I felt that when the results from the research would be presented to the staff at the end of the project, they would be more receptive to hearing the ideas from the students.

After each member had been given time to reflect and record, we shared responses and grouped similar statements where possible. The next activity as a group was to rank the responses in order of importance as perceived by the students, from the most engaging strategy to the least. Shortly after this session the members of the group were assigned their own group of peers to complete the same process.

In the end, the team members were able to regroup with their separate lists of strategies that work to keep their peers engaged in learning. Using this information the group then compared, and again grouped, similar responses, finally ending up with a list of eight key strategies for positive engagement. The group then set about the task of arranging these strategies into poses to be taken as photographs. The photographs, with their detailed captions, were presented at the second student forum (see opposite).

All students in the team agreed that one ‘type of activity’, ‘hands-on work’, was the most engaging. The response that caused the greatest area of discussion was that of ‘working in a group/cooperative group work’. The students varied in their feelings towards working in a group stating how ‘uncomfortable (it can be) telling someone you don’t like their idea’ and the frustration ‘when people don’t do their jobs.’ These responses were interesting given the way in which we had witnessed the teams working together in a positive manner since the research phase began. From the feedback of the students prior to this discussion we were aware of one group who were experiencing difficulty with a group member who would often refuse to cooperate.

The success of the individual team members in running a brainstorming group came in varying degrees. Whilst roving and listening to the discussions taking place, I found that, despite displaying a strong understanding in the practice group, a few of the members of the team had misunderstood that the focus was on engagement to learning. Some of the responses they were receiving from their peer group related to out of school activities or required probing to gather greater detail and explanation.

The results from the surveys regarding the students’ own perceptions on their levels of engagement on the various subjects proved to be surprising. With the exception of Religion, more than 50% of the senior students believe that they were engaged most of the time or above in the identified subject areas. These results were unexpected as we felt that their perceived engagement levels would be lower given our observations made in the classroom setting. What was pleasing was that there was now only a small minority of students who stated that during SAT lessons they were engaged ‘half the time’ down to ‘little of the time’.

When I sat down with the team to discuss their findings I realised that more time, experience and practice in running a focus group would have been appropriate to allow the students to fully understand what they were asking their peers and to be able to guide them in the direction of engagement to learning as opposed to simply what they find fun. This would have ensured greater independence of the team members and meant that I would not have had to interrupt their research time.

Making Change

Evidence from research strongly suggests that school reform cannot happen without listening to the students and, for change to occur that is worthwhile and effective, it is paramount to include the key stakeholders – the students – in the process.

Using a Student Action Team to investigate strategies of engagement that are relevant specifically to our students...
will assist us in spreading the positive engagement levels witnessed in SAT sessions to other areas of the curriculum that the students identified they were least engaged in. By asking our students to identify the strategies that engage them in their learning, we have opened a dialogue between teachers and students. This is a positive step towards creating effective change that is relevant to our setting and clientele. The challenge now is to use this information to increase the use of the strategies already existing within our lesson planning and trialling those that are not. It is vital for this next cycle to occur, otherwise the students will feel the process is tokenistic and their opinions are devalued.

Based on the observations from this project, the Student Action Team model is an effective process through which to initiate the process of change, whilst engaging students along the way. Despite a discouraging start to the process, the further into the project the students journeyed, the more engaged they became in their activities. Through the participation of an entire year level we gave a greater number of students the opportunity to have their voices heard, especially those who were disengaged and the more reserved students who find it daunting to express themselves in larger group settings. From here it will be important for the school to ensure that more members of staff are provided with the skills necessary to manage Student Actions Teams, as this will give the program a greater chance of continuation beyond the life of this project. This will also allow the possibility of the teams extending to other year levels.

I also feel confident that, by implementing the changes through using the action research model, we have laid the foundations for Student Action Teams to become a permanent feature of the senior curriculum. It has ensured that our work was based on evidence and was a high quality program that has been shown to be of high quality - which is important for the sustainability of a change. Through the observation and reflection phases we were able to highlight anything that did not operate smoothly and make adjustments along the way.

The process to date has been personally rewarding and encouraging. Witnessing our usually disengaged and disruptive students become enthusiastic and cooperative with their peers makes me hopeful for the long-term success of Student Action Teams. Although we still have a long way to go, I feel confident that the engagement of our students will continue to increase. With a larger team of both students and teachers, we will be able to implement and embed creative, significant and sustainable changes within the school.

Amy Harrison

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What have we learnt about SATs?

What have we now learnt from the operation of these Student Action Teams? At the end of 2011, the St Charles Borromeo students and their teachers completed evaluations in which they reflected on their experiences.

Overall Responses

All students rated the project positively (with almost all saying it was ‘pretty good’ or ‘brilliant’), and over two thirds indicated that their own engagement had increased throughout the SAT. When asked for their reasons for these positive responses, some students wrote about the overall SAT approach, while others thought more about the outcomes of their own individual or small group projects. For example, some students either said that the project was positive because they had worked well (and enjoyed the experience), or that they could have done better: “I learnt a lot and I can use it for my learning in high school next year”; “My engagement went up and overall we were pretty good”; “I mucked around sometimes, but I worked hard at other times.”

The largest number of responses identified the value of working in a productive group, working with other classes, and the importance of the feedback that the students received from other classes and from teachers: “My team worked as a team. It was fun. Everyone was engaged”; “Everyone in my group joined in and we worked really hard on those posters”; “We worked together and were strong”; “The 3/4K kids were very engaged with what we said and did (well, after the first visit). It has helped me focus in class a bit and might have affected 3/4K.”

A few of the students responded more abstractly about the SAT processes that led to outcomes ie they went beyond personal or group responsibility to look at the structure of the project. This included comments on the importance of several themes:

- working with peers (“My engagement went up because I was learning with a group of peers. This made the work more fun”);
- making public presentations, including teaching others (“Whilst learning about engagement and levels, it’s made me feel engaged. Teaching children about engagement is really fun and engaging”);
- taking responsibility (“My engagement went up because I got to take the responsibility of it all”); and
- graded learning (“The things we had to do got harder”)

Similarly, the teachers were positive, identifying that: “Students were engaged in a team: each member had a role, their interaction with classes was good and this gave a focus for the project duration.” They noted that students’ engagement with the project improved “as we got into the action phases”. (The more detailed teacher comments included earlier expand on this change.)

Reflections on the SAT Impact

When we probed further and asked students about the impact that being involved in the Student Action Team had made on them, they specifically identified increases in their engagement through the processes of reflection on the actual issue of engagement (“I think it made me think on how well my engagement was and how I improved”; “I think it made me realise how important engagement is”; “It allowed us to think deeply into what engages us and how we could use that to make the school better”).

Students also identified that their knowledge about engagement and about the related topics had improved: “It made me know a lot more about engagement”; “We know now how much people eat for breakfast”; “We now know all the ways engagement is affected”. The teachers similarly identified that “knowing what engagement looked like/ felt like [and] finding out what engaged the kids” was a positive outcome for their students.

However, there were also many references to the project’s impact on other aspects of students’ development:

- their sense of organisation, control and responsibility (“It showed me new things and how to take control”);
- confidence (“It got me more confident with speaking out aloud”);
- exercise of responsibility (“Teaching students who are younger than you and look up to you makes you want to be engaged”); “The SAT project had a big impact on me. I found that I improved on group work, presenting and responsibility. I became more engaged because I had to think about what things would make our class more engaged”); and
- individual and group commitment (“Everyone in the group was doing work”).

The teachers worried that students were critical about the outcomes of their work and suggested that the Student Action Team had made a huge impact on the students – even if they don’t realise it! They were focused and worked well.”

The students also identified aspects of the project’s impact on other students in the school through their work with other grades. They said they had increased others’ engagement generally:

- because of the activities done (“The project helped grades all over the school become more engaged because of the activities the groups set up for the kids”; “They were gaining engagement every time we visited them”);
- by the enjoyment of working with older students (“It has made them smile and laugh and have a good time learning”); or
- by increasing their reflection on engagement too (“They learned new things which taught them different ways to learn”).

One student commented about the impact of the senior students demonstrating engaging learning approaches to their younger peers: “It really raised the bar for them in our group because we did fun activities with them.” This transfer of
understanding about engagement to other students was also noted by the teachers: “It unpacked engagement with other students [and] heightened their awareness of what engaged them in school.”

The third area of impact that we asked about was the students’ impact on practices in the school. Because action proposals had been made, but not really yet implemented, students’ responses were more cautious. Some reported in terms of what they had done, rather than about any impacts they had observed. Many reported on generally positive responses from teachers: “The teachers really listened to what we had to say”; “I think they were pleased with our work we did”, including recognising the competence of students in taking initiatives around curriculum and pedagogy issues: “It made a big impact on the school by making the school see that the 5-6s are responsible and they saw us differently”. Other students expressed hopeful anticipation of future impacts on the school: “Well, the results aren’t exactly finished, but I think we did give the school an idea or a thought on our subject”; “Our impact will change the school forever with our healthy dieting”; “I think that teachers, parents and students will all take our results into everyday learning”.

The teachers were also hopeful about a future impact as the students’ proposals are considered by the school’s staff: “I think this will happen next year as long as the actions are sustained.” While they can see some immediate changes as staff have responded to the students’ suggestions (‘As classroom teachers hear their students’ responses, [it] may have motivated them to change the way they were doing things eg more hands-on activities in some classes for engagement’), they also recognise the need to have such approaches seriously considered within staff professional development (“More work with other staff is needed so that they are open to change”).

Reflections on the Process: Difficulties and Enjoyments

Despite the strongly positive view on the processes and outcomes, students also found some aspects of their Student Action Teams difficult. They were often challenged by working with other grades, but also by working together in a productive team (including achieving task outcomes and on time). They identified difficulties with areas such as: “Cooperating with other members of my team”; “Getting the kids to focus and doing final presentations”; “Getting the group together, working together, not as an individual”; “Getting the small projects finished on time”.

In working with other classes, they expressed some frustrations about younger students: “They were loud and they sometimes listened”; “Getting in charge of a whole class”; “Deciding on how to approach our class”; “Thinking of something to say to the Year 2s and speaking in front of the Year 2s”. Some were concerned about: “The amount of time we had. We didn’t have enough time to practise our stuff”, while others struggled with the research: “Trying to collect all the data. It was hard to keep up.”

But these difficulties were overwhelmed by their enjoyment, often in the same areas – and particularly with working with and in other classes: “Making worksheets, being the teacher and teaching children”; “Playing and interacting with 1/2s; teaching them new things so they can maybe be us in 5/6.” We can also read into this the idea of having practical, applied outcomes of learning: “Presenting to all the other groups”; “Finishing the engagement tool, and presenting it”; “Sharing it with everyone.”

In addition, there were strong indications about the importance of working in a team and with friends: “Seeing how everyone cooperates; bonding; being with my group; making jokes”; “To see how people in my group worked and all the jokes we had”; and about the hands-on, productive nature of this teamwork: “When we made our model and poster”; “Completing the posters and making them colourful and neat.”

For teachers, “keeping up the momentum with everything else that happens in a school … sticking to a timeline” was a difficulty. And they reported being frustrated when students lacked enthusiasm, particularly early in the process. However, when they were “seeing the students engaged in their teams – students taking on specific roles [and] hearing feedback from students on engagement – students taking action on their research” or “seeing the children working in effective teams”, this became a much more enjoyable experience for them too.
Reflections on Learning

In parallel with the idea of enjoyment, students were asked about their learning through this process. Some of this learning, they said, was about engagement, some about their specific topic. But many responses were also about the processes involved: group work, cooperation and so on: “Engagement is important; kids need to know about it”; “It really showed me how disengaged they were and how engaged they were”; “Kids can understand engagement but sometimes they choose not to”; “There are some things that are really important and we could focus on more.” They also reported they had learnt about the various smaller topics they had investigated: “Some people love getting rewards and getting their work done.”

Positively, many focused on reflections about their skill development: “How I need to be more organised in the future; how to take control of a class”; “Teaching is hard work and that if we work together, it can turn out great”; “To be a good leader and speak in front of crowds”; or about their responsibility and capacity to make a difference: “That students can make a difference to their school!”; “You can put your mind to something if you try.”

Teachers focused more on their learning about the processes involved in operating Student Action Teams, including: “Giving students an opportunity to have a voice, to research, plan for action to bring about change”, and the “need to be flexible with the time because of time constraints in a school.” They acknowledged that: “engagement is a difficult concept for young people to understand.”

Reflections on SAT as a Way of Learning

These classes had previously been involved in various forms of Inquiry Learning within their curriculum, around topics defined by the school. How did the Student Action Team differ from these approaches?

Students particularly highlighted the practical involvement of their Student Action Teams in:
- doing things with other grades;
- working within a productive team;
- having responsibility for determining directions; and
- focusing explicitly on learning and engagement.

Their involvement with other grades was seen as doing something with their learning: “It was something different than just doing worksheets; we got to teach kids”; “It was different because we were teaching the kids and the teachers something too”; “I really liked teaching kids as well as learning at the same time”;

“It gave us a chance on doing the research and spreading it on to different classes.”

There was a sense of greater student responsibility and influence over their learning: “It was the students working independently without teachers’ help”; “It is run by students”; “You get to influence what happens”; “Finding our own research with no teachers’ help. Doing things we really don’t know”; “We got to try different ways”; “You could do more and you were more involved.” This was also recognised by teachers, who identified that the Student Action Team approach was “student-driven. Even though our inquiry is supposed to be like that, it doesn’t always work out that way, but SAT does – which is fantastic.”

Even though students generally work cooperatively within table groups in these classrooms, the Student Action Teams seemed to provide an extra dimension to group work: “It taught us to have roles in our team and responsibilities”; “I did the entire thing with the same team instead of doing some bits with myself and such”; “I got to be more social with the 5/6s, not like other learning in school.”
Connect 193:

The explicit nature of the topic – about how to learn – was also appreciated: “It teaches you how to be engaged, which we don’t really learn”; “It was a really fun and the project opened many doors to engagement levels.”

Finally, students and teachers were asked what they would have done differently. The intention here was that they would suggest structural changes to the SAT approach, but most students responded about themselves or their groups – individualising responsibility for improvement: “I would be a bit more organised and take more control over 1-2J”; “I would come up with more ideas with experience.” Apart from those personal changes, students suggested improvements in teamwork: “The focus of our team members”, or changes in the specific topics addressed: “I would choose a different topic to look at children’s engagement from a different perspective”; “Probably do a bigger action because we do not have a lot of time when we did our action.” However, many students simply responded: “Nothing – because I think this is how far we could go”, though one or two wished that there had been more time to have a more substantial impact.

These timing issues were also at the forefront of the teacher comments: “Start the research in Term 1 now that we have team roles defined.” They also suggested that the school could “try our own choice for focus next year” and pay greater attention to “keeping up the staff momentum and accountability.”

Conclusions

There are two areas that made this Student Action Team both difficult but also important. First, the focus on ‘engagement’ was a fairly ‘abstract’ concept for students to grapple with. It required some time for them to understand what was meant, and then to explore ways to gather perspectives from other students, and therefore to make it more ‘concrete’.

However, the explicit exploration of engagement as a topic also turned out to be important, for this enabled students to think about their own learning and to be able to recognise that they already had some understanding of how they learnt best, and what might shape that learning. We know that undertaking a Student Action Team is engaging in itself; this approach (as has happened in other similar projects) has shown that engagement is developed when students are challenged to think about and investigate their engagement and that of other students.

Secondly, the topic of engagement had emerged from teacher concerns rather than initially from student concerns. So there was diminished opportunity for students to choose to undertake this as a topic. In addition, as this was undertaken as a ‘whole cohort’ approach, and as part of their core curriculum, there was no opportunity for students to say that they would not be involved. It is therefore not surprising that there was initially lower commitment to and engagement with the topic. It took time for students to explore it, recognise its importance, become engaged with the questions and start to structure their investigations.

But once that had happened and particularly once the Grade 5-6 students had begun to ‘externalise’ the issue by considering the engagement of ‘others’ (ie students in the lower grades), most students became excited about possibilities and engaged with their own investigations. A key aspect of this was the challenge to the teams to consider how they would interpret ‘engagement’ to other students and the construction of physical models of engagement that they could use to make sense to others. This was a useful approach to such an abstract topic.

Finally, by working with other grades throughout the research and action phases, this Student Action Team was clearly focused on direct use of knowledge and skills gained. As the Grade 5-6 students learnt about engagement, they were thinking about teaching others, and also about proposing and making change within the school. Their learning was both action-oriented and optimistic. The teachers highlighted this action-orientation of learning in reflecting that: “Students were actively engaged in the projects for a longer length of time. It was a project aimed at initiating change based on research, using the action research model.”

Whether one uses the particular steps of Student Action Teams or not, these seem to be principles for effective and engaging learning in any classroom: recognising and building on the knowledge and competence of students, enabling them to make decisions about their own investigations, and ensuring that they can experience positive outcomes that make a difference to their environments.

Compiled by Roger Holdsworth

For more information, contact Susan Camilleri or Sue Cahill at St Charles Borromeo PS, Templestowe: suec@sctemplestowe.catholic.edu.au scahill@sctemplestowe.catholic.edu.au

More about Student Action Teams, including some linked mini-case studies, at:

www.aspinworld.com/student_action_teams
In reflecting on what was learnt from the experience of these Student Action Teams, Sue Cahill (Student Wellbeing Coordinator at St Charles Borromeo PS) and Roger Holdsworth (Connect) started a conversation about students’ and teachers’ understanding of engagement – and what this shows us about how we listen to and challenge ‘student voice’. This is how the conversation started. In reality, it deflected onto other areas, however our further reflection indicates how such a conversation might have continued.

SC: I’ve been thinking a lot about these ideas of engagement. It seems to me that students might have substantially different understanding of what engagement means than we do.

RH: That’s the value of engaging them in such discussions – they challenge our understanding and ask us to see those concepts in different ways. But I also struggle to push students’ understanding along. In this project, I struggled with ideas about ‘fun’: students seemed to slide between ideas of ‘engagement’ and ‘fun’, and this stopped them thinking about what was ‘fun’ for example – and why.

SC: So what does that mean for our capacity to listen to student voices about such complicated ideas? Should we really be expecting students to have insights that challenge us? Should we be simply accepting their understanding? After all, we’re doing lots of other reading on the topic.

RH: We played with a tool in this project to ask students to explore the difference between ‘fun’ and ‘engagement’ by setting up a couple of axes – like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Boring</th>
<th>Fun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not Engaging</td>
<td>Engaging</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So this can raise topics for discussion with students about what examples they could think of in the four quadrants: ‘Can something be engaging but not that much fun?’ ‘Can something be fun but not that engaging?’

SC: But that also applies to our own experience of Board meetings, staff meetings, our own writing etc. We can see times that are a hard slog: perhaps even boring, but because they are important, we are totally engaged in them.

RH: So such a tool and a discussion with students can help us shape and deepen our own ideas. Behind this, I am also thinking that this throws some light on ideas about ‘student voice’, for we are seeing such ideas within an educational or developmental context. We are seriously listening to what students are saying, but seeing such ‘voice’ in a dynamic (or developing) way rather than having a static or absolute idea of ‘truth’ – ie just because these are ‘student voices’.

SC: And the same thing then applies to the idea of ‘teacher voice’ or ‘adult voice’, for there should be nothing static or absolute about that either. We are shaping our ideas of engagement in this case, listening to what students are saying. That seems to me to be one of those important points about this approach: that teachers are also engaged in the exploration of uncertain ideas, where they cannot or should not retreat to a sense that they already know the answers – and have to simply tell students these answers. And this challenges the idea that teachers have nothing to learn (from students too) from their classroom experiences.

RH: What we are learning about Student Action Teams is, I think, about how they open up possibilities for students and teachers to learn together – to collaborate in investigations and action research. That means both groups seriously listening to each other and both owning and being excited about finding out the answer to important questions. In some cases these questions are inside the school – about teaching and learning – and sometimes they are in the broader community.

SC: So, for example, the work we did around Values Education initially involved Student Action Teams investigating what values meant within our community, to what extent these values were shared, and what action was needed to develop better education about values. But this also led to students initiating Values Action Teams, through which students, teachers and parents worked together to investigate and act on these matters of shared concern. And students had a key role in driving this approach along.
Inner South Innovative Community Action Network Project

ICANs are an initiative of the South Australian Government’s Social Inclusion Board and Department for Education and Child Development’s (ECD) School to Work agenda. They provide specific support to disengaged young people who may be at risk of early school leaving, or have left school without a formal qualification that will provide an entry point to meaningful future employment.

The Inner Southern ICAN is a local community partnership model that works collaboratively with schools and community partners to ensure at-risk young people from year 6 to 19 years of age have access to meaningful learning and supported pathways to further education, training and employment opportunities so they can reach their full potential.

ICANs provide community partnership grant funding to support community partners and schools to collaboratively develop innovative and creative initiatives to meet locally identified ICAN priorities. ICAN programs will focus on supporting customised, innovative learning outcomes. Within the framework of the South Australian Government’s ICAN Strategy, and following an extensive community consultation process, the Inner South ICAN Management Committee has identified a priority for a Year 9 Focus in 2012, to be delivered at four High Schools in the Inner Southern region: Pasadena, Blackwood, Mitcham Girls, and Seaview High Schools.

The project will acknowledge and support the unique needs of Year 9s to develop connectedness to, relationships with, and enjoyment within their school community, to enable and empower them to positively influence their retention and engagement at school. It will enable at risk year 9 students to be engaged in more creative student forums within the schools by:

• Assisting schools to increase the dynamism and inclusiveness of student voice;
• Providing a platform enabling the student voice to be heard, develop their leadership skills, and encourage proactive communication;
• Assisting schools to further develop processes that enable student forum recommendations to influence the school’s learning environment; and
• Producing written resources - tools, terminology and methodology - developed collaboratively throughout the program and providing a Student Action manual for ICAN and schools future use.

For more information, contact Janine Hinton, Inner South ICAN Program Manager on 08 8207 3695 or email: Janine.hinton@sa.gov.au
Class Captains?

A **Class Captain**, whether called that or any other name, can be a redundant title used to obtain a badge or pad a résumé. And they do go by many other names: Home Group Captains, Form Captains, Peer Group Leaders, Pastoral Care Leaders - are all titles created to share leadership roles around more students.

When working with students who have been placed in such leadership roles, mostly we find that the job description they have been given is vague and unhelpful. Examples of the jobs these students perform is often limited to fetching the class lists before assembly each morning so that the teacher may mark who is present. This task is simply to keep a student occupied in the guise of leadership, as whenever the Class Captain is absent, the teacher assigns another student at random to perform the menial task. There was a time when students were allowed to mark attendance themselves under the teacher’s supervision, but arguments of the role being a legal document have put a stop to that.

Another function that Class Captains may be expected to perform occurs when, for whatever reason, a teacher has failed to arrive to take a class. The Class Captain must then turn over the task so that adult supervision can be found and despatched to the room. This is the responsible course of action, but in other students’ eyes, it can make a ‘traitor’ out of a would-be leader without giving them first any real credibility or authority that would allow such ‘turncoat’ behaviour.

In some schools, the Class Captain has responsibility for collecting social justice contributions from the class, but in other schools yet another title, that of Social Justice Captain, has been created for this job.

So why do these roles continue? Schools are creating and filling these titled roles in response to the perception that leadership has been exercised by the same small number of students — who are often already quite capable individuals. The desire is then to share the experience and opportunity with more students. Up to this point the theory is sound. The problem is that no skills will be developed while the illusion of having great leadership opportunities will be maintained. If you have ever heard the complaint that student elections for leadership roles are simply ‘popularity contests’, this is perhaps why. Rather than casting a vote for ‘who I think is best suited for this position’, students revert to voting for ‘who I like best’. Why shouldn’t they do this when the consequences of voting against your friend far outweigh the cost of voting in the worst possible candidate — since the job isn’t meaningful anyway?

**What CAN Happen?**

Schools have a very real ability to offer Class Captains a genuine leadership role. **Second Strike** has developed several approaches that work:

1. **Offer a training day for Class Captains during which they are provided a free-ranging discussion on what their roles could be and what they hope to achieve.** In this way students will be able to **participate** in the growth of their role rather than having new tasks thrust upon them without consultation.

2. **Hold a luncheon once per term with the Class Captains, Year Level Coordinators and as many of the Principal class as possible.** This luncheon is an open forum for Class Captains to pose questions, report problems and make requests. This is not the meeting for teachers to be saying ‘no’; this is a space for open minds only. Make sure the food is very good so the whole day seems professional, and ensure that the teachers know they are required to report back to their classes. Lastly, be careful that the Student Council is not being undermined by this; consider including them as well.

3. **Offer an opportunity for each class to create a project through the year. This has been a successful strategy at many schools and does not have to revert solely to which class can raise the most money for a charity.** At least once a week the Class Captain chairs the meeting/assembly/form group to advance the project.

4. **Partner with the Student Council so that the Class Captains can conduct surveys on behalf of the SRC.** Ensure that the captains then get to report their results to the SRC and discuss them, not simply deliver back the completed papers.

5. **Hold regular consultations between the Student Council and the Class Captains.**

6. **Hold a meeting with all the Class/ Homeroom teachers to hear their views and concerns.** It is vital to have their backing and cooperation in any extension to the Class Captains’ role.

7. **Though not on offer to Year 7s, Second Strike offers a program whereby student leaders are trained and supported to conduct a leadership conference with the local primary school students eg from Grades 5 and 6.** This could be an excellent opportunity for some, if not all, the Class Captains to participate.

Second Strike is hosting two **Class Captain Leadership Seminars** this year. You are invited to send a maximum of four Class Captains along from Years 7 and 8. These leaders will return with a capacity and a commitment to sharing their skills with other Class Captains.

See details in the Second Strike calendar on page 24. If a school is not serious about student leadership, it would be better instead to have no such roles, or to delegate these role to the class’s SRC members. If the school is only interested in advertising the longest possible list of various titles on offer, then at the very least the jobs could be acknowledged for what they really are: **roles of responsibility rather than of leadership.**

David Mould
Director, Second Strike

Second Strike is a company dedicated to training and supporting student leadership and participation. For more information visit www.second-strike.com
For several years now, the VicSRC has run a series of sub-regional SRC conferences across Victoria. These have been highly successful in enabling students to meet together across schools, learn from each other and work together on common interests. Our experience shows that just creating these spaces for students to meet, express themselves and realise how much they have in common can be a very empowering opportunity for the young people and SRCs involved.

**So what’s a conference?**

Conferences are one day events and fit within school hours. They are hosted by local schools and invitations to attend are sent out to other schools in the local area.

**What do we do?**

The conference programs are mainly interactive and are designed with student participation as well as active learning outcomes in mind. Conferences are designed for SRC members and will enable students to:

- Identify issues of concern that they share – and develop plans around them;
- Learn how to effectively plan responses to important issues;
- Share information about what their SRC is doing and learn about other SRCs and their work;
- Be challenged about making their SRC more effective;
- Link their interests to on-going action through the VicSRC – through local clusters and the Statewide SRC Congress later in the year.

**Are you interested in hosting a Regional Student Conference in 2012?**

If you are interested in hosting a regional student conference at your school in 2012 please contact the VicSRC Coordinator, Kate Walsh on (03) 9267 3744 or email coordinator@vicsrc.org.au to discuss the possibility.

To host a conference, local partners need to organise a venue for approximately 50 people and catering for the event.

The VicSRC will provide a conference program, a presenter to deliver it, statewide publicity of all the conferences and handle registrations.

Conferences are already planned for:

- **Mortlake P-12 College:** Friday May 4th
- **Balwyn High School:** Friday May 11th
- **Yarram Secondary College:** Friday May 18th

More to come... check out the VicSRC website for further updates.

[www.vicsrc.org.au](http://www.vicsrc.org.au)
On Friday October 28 last year, we attended the Victorian Association of State School Principals’ (VASSP) Annual General Meeting on behalf of the VicSRC to make a presentation about the top five ways in which principals can support student participation in their schools. This is what we said:

- Firstly, ensure that your school’s SRC does important work within your school and community. This makes sure that your school’s SRC becomes a meaningful part of the school and does not get caught in the trap of just organising activities and fundraising. For the principal, this means actively seeking the views of the SRC on important issues, bringing new issues to the attention of the SRC to find solutions, and establishing Student Action Teams to research and develop these solutions. For example, at Balwyn High School, we are seeking to improve the final week programs for each year level. In our SRC meeting we brainstormed what we thought needed to be changed. Then the SRC members who had a clear idea of what they wanted for this final week, drafted formal proposals for the School Council and budget meetings – which were then approved and have resulted in the Year 10s and 11s starting the following year’s course in the final week of the year.

If the SRC’s work is able to be seen as effective amongst the student body, this then sparks off a ‘domino effect’: as students become able to see the effect of what they are doing and the positive impact that they are able to have upon the school, more students are likely to want to become involved in the SRC and bring new ideas to the SRC.

- The second way to support student participation is to create important links between decision-making bodies and Student Representative Councils. This ensures that the voices of the students are being heard on relevant issues by the right people. To implement this within your school, firstly establish elected student positions within School Councils, and then allow interested and dedicated students to become part of sub-committees and other relevant bodies such as: physical resources, uniform, environmental, drama, dance and sport committees. (At your own school, systems may be set up slightly differently and this action may therefore need to be slightly altered.) But it is vitally important to remember that the voices of students will be lost if they are not listened to by the right people.

- Allocating an SRC coordinating teacher as a leading teacher position is another way to strongly support your school’s collective student voice. The leading teacher selected should be someone who is in tune with both the students and teachers and is able to provide the vital link between the students and the previously mentioned decision-making bodies at the school. To draw on another example of practices from one of our schools, we recently selected our coordinating teacher for 2012 by having a year 11 member of the SRC on the interview panel. To some teachers, this may seem impractical but, with the quality of applicants, it provided an extra perspective to see which applicants really engaged with the student on the panel rather than ignored them – as this was likely to be reflected in the role.

- The fourth way to encourage student participation is very straightforward: ensure your Student Representative Council has an annual budget! This is critically important for the work SRCs do, as they then do not need to rely solely on their own fundraising to carry out changes they wish to see within the school. An annual budget will allow the SRC to shift their focus from fundraising to student voice: the topic they should be most involved with. A simple action to guarantee that this will happen is to allocate the SRC an annual budget and make sure they know that it is available to them!

- The fifth way to support students participating within your school is to provide those who do so with credit and recognition. Copious amounts of tedious behind-the-scenes work, meetings and planning go into everything an SRC produces. Students involved in the SRC go above and beyond the basic requirements of school, to participate in making their learning community a better place. This involves them in important learning and skill development. This work and time contribution should be recognised and credited. Within your school you can help to support students and teachers by arranging times and ways for this work to be credited as part of the students’ overall school curriculum.

Every principal has the potential to become a principal who is seen to listen to students and take action on what they say to create a better school.

Tiffany Chapman
Samantha McClelland
VicSRC Executive

The VicSRC receives funding support from the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and is auspiced by and based at the Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (YACVic). It can be reached there on 03 9267 3744 or, for the cost of a local call from outside Melbourne on 1300 727 176; or by email: vicsrc@yacvic.org.au
VicSRC Executive Meets Rural Youth Ambassadors

The Rural Youth Ambassador program is an initiative developed by the Country Education Project and VicSRC to provide a youth voice on rural education. This year, there are 13 Rural Youth Ambassadors representing both Catholic and Government schools in Victorian country regions, supported through scholarships provided by each of the DEECD country regions and the CEO Diocese offices.

These Ambassadors workshop and discuss issues and ideas around engaging and retaining young people in rural learning.

The VicSRC Executive currently consists of 16 students, elected by their peers at the annual VicSRC Congress. They manage the organisation, and implement initiatives and priorities set by the Congress.

Recently, representatives of the two groups of students met for a day. As we introduced ourselves, we started to realise how the two representative bodies were different but also alike in many ways. This was clearly highlighted through the many goals that both parties wanted to achieve. Even though we were at different stages in our lives and we had come from different families and cultures, we all had the same vision: to make a difference in schools throughout Victoria.

As we brainstormed through personal and private conversations, the two parties got along soundly together and realised the similarities in many of the issues faced by us. This idea was consolidated following the VicSRC’s presentation and it was agreed that continuing contact and collaboration would be the perfect way to expand the impact of both bodies upon the Victorian schooling system.

New friends were made and friendships became stronger. Fantastic photos were taken and many creative and unique ideas shared.

Reflecting on this opportunity, Justine Jaramillo (Year 12 at Narre Warren South P-12 College) commented: “The Rural Youth Ambassador meeting was such a good experience. We shared our experiences with them and they explained theirs. We found that some experiences were similar but others were more specific to rural students. In the future, the VicSRC and the Rural Ambassadors can work together in order to achieve each others’ goals.”

Next, we headed to the Australian Catholic University where the Rural Youth Ambassadors were staying. As some of us gave our goodbyes, we knew that we would be able to keep in touch with our fellow students through Facebook.

At 5 pm, the rest of the VicSRC Executive accompanied the Rural Youth Ambassadors to dinner in Chinatown where we had dumplings in a Chinese dumpling house. Finally, the rest of us gave our goodbyes and we went off on our separate ways.

The VicSRC Executive reflected on the day and what we had achieved during our collaboration with the Rural Youth Ambassadors. Ellie Patterson (Year 11 at Melbourne Girls’ College) stated: “It was a great experience and opportunity to meet like-minded people from other areas of the state to work together on achieving our common goals.” Similarly, Samantha McClelland (Year 12 at Balwyn High School) said: “It was great to see a group of young people actually trying to make a difference to the education system and their public perception.”

I hope that the two student representative bodies will be given the same opportunity to work together in future again.

Sufi Salieh
VicSRC Executive
Students Act on Cuts to VCAL Funding

VCAL is the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning, a recognised senior secondary school qualification, and an alternative to VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education) for students in years 10, 11 and 12 (and some mature-aged students) in Victoria. VCAL focuses on ‘hands-on-learning’. After completion, VCAL students are likely to go onto TAFE, an apprenticeship or gain paid employment, often in a trade.

In 2011 for example, 20,000 students undertook a VCAL qualification at more than 400 schools, TAFEs and Adult Learning Centres.

VCAL courses also emphasise that students take responsibility for decision-making about what they do within their courses. With the help of their school-based VCAL Coordinator, students design a study program that suits their specific interests and learning needs.

Unlike VCE, where the course is set by the VCAA (Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority) and must be followed to the letter, a student's VCAL course is negotiated by them and their teacher or instructor, according to how they learn and what they need to learn.

VCAL provides practical work-related experience, as well as the opportunity to build on literacy and numeracy, and areas of work skills and personal development. In addition to their VCAL units, students select accredited curriculum components from VCE study subjects, VET (Vocational Education and Training) qualifications, or Further Education units.

Students can transfer over to a VCE qualification if needed and will get credits towards a Certificate II or Certificate III qualification for work they have successfully completed as part of their VCAL.

Impact of VCAL

The On Track program gathers data about young people leaving school in Victoria. It provides evidence of VCAL’s success rates in helping those students to continue with education instead of dropping out. In 2011, 85% of students who completed a VCAL-only qualification and 87% of students who completed a VCAL/VCE qualification have followed a pathway to education, training or work after their VCAL studies. (www.theage.com.au/victoria/vocational-funds-not-enough-as-more-cuts-loom-20111011-1ljgq.html)

Eddie Micallef (Deputy Chairperson of the Ethnic Community Council of Victoria) has pointed out that, in a multicultural nation, students who are refugees or migrants have opted for VCAL because it gives added language and workplace support. Other impacts have been that, as VCAL students begin work, welfare costs and crime rates are reduced, and young people give back to the community in which they live. Australia faces a shortage of skilled labour; it is therefore essential to provide students with as many workforce pathways and relevant skills as possible.

One VCAL student told us: "The importance of this course is that I get to leave school with a Year 12 pass and also as a qualified personal trainer. I can choose what I want to do - that's about my control over my learning as well."

Cuts to VCAL Funding

A recent decision of the Victorian State Government has been to cut $48 million from VCAL courses over the next four-year period. VCAL funding goes to 421 secondary schools in varying amounts ranging from $10,000 to $125,000 per school. This money is used to cover classes for teachers who run, monitor and assist the program. The amount a school gets is dependent on enrolments, and on how many classes teachers are taken away from. The cuts are particularly being made to funds to support VCAL Coordinators in schools.

The Government says that the VCAL coordinator funding was ever only intended for the initial set-up of the program in 2003, and that, as the program is now well established, this level of funding is no longer required. Core funding for the program will still continue to cater for future growth.

VCAL Coordinators

The main tasks of VCAL Coordinators are to:

- Make connections with local employers and set up work experience programs for young people;
- Tailor the VCAL program to individual students’ needs;
- Develop curriculum and assessment materials;
- Co-ordinate student administration;
- Be knowledgeable about and advise on VCAL eligibility requirements;
- Assess RPL (Recognition of Prior Learning) for students;
The VCAL student at one of our schools said: “The cuts affect me directly. With less funding to teachers or TAFE courses, it means I only have one TAFE day every month at the moment. I want to achieve my highest possible results and these cuts are holding me back.”

We think there are many reasons why the Government needs to keep providing the VCAL funding.

With an increasing emphasis on the need to strengthen the Victorian economy, enhanced skills and high employability are achieved through keeping young people being educated at school. It makes no sense to us to cut funding from a program that has demonstrated great success in responding to these challenges.

The funding cuts by the Victorian Government and the reasons given for it fail to recognise and appreciate the time and resources it takes to support VCAL students, particularly refugees, migrants, students from broken homes, students struggling with mental health issues, or with drug and alcohol problems.

So we’d argue that program support must be funded appropriately! Even after the program has been established, sufficient funding for ongoing administration and co-ordination work by the VCAL Coordinator needs to remain available for the benefit of the students.

Impact of VCAL Budget Cuts

The funding cuts will have an impact on thousands of students across the state. The cuts could force some schools and other establishments to cut their VCAL educational programs.

With funding cuts, schools may lose valuable money to be able to pay for a VCAL Coordinator. Where they exist with limited time release, Coordinators will no longer be able to give the adequate time or assistance that is required for individual input to students. It may even come to a situation where a school decides that VCAL continues, but that other areas in the school will suffer from lack of funding – and either solution is not a good outcome.

The benefits of the VCAL program are likely to be reduced and fewer students will have access to this practical hands-on training environment. There is an increased risk of these students dropping out of school before completing Year 12. Many students who do not thrive in a traditional classroom environment could opt out of school if VCAL were no longer an option/alternative pathway. Some might then find it more difficult to gain employment immediately after high school.

• Determine the personal development skills that need to be addressed.

As this is a very hands-on program, extra assistance and help is often required for students to complete their VCAL qualification. Coordinators also have specialist knowledge of VCAL eligibility requirements over a range of areas in ways that cannot be ‘handballed’ to just any teacher. It takes time to develop this knowledge and pass it on to students in a meaningful and consistent way.

What can we students do about it?

There has been lots of opposition to these cuts from various groups, but students themselves have not been heard from – until now. The VicSRC Executive recently decided to publicise these changes and to urge students – both those doing VCAL and others – to express their views.

Speak up! Let the Department of Education know how these budget cuts will not only affect students doing VCAL, but all students in VCE. After all, it is our education we are talking about here. To prevent further reductions in funding and to get the $48 million reinstated, try some or all of the following:

• Already there has been significant opposition to the decision from schools and community organisations. An Open Letter to the Premier was published in The Age, signed by 132 Victorian Secondary School Principals and community organisations, including VC OSS (the Victorian Council of Social Service) and several VC OSS members. VC OSS intends to continue raising concerns about this issue, and will urge full re-funding in its 2012-2013 State Budget Submission.

• Students, teachers and parents can write to their local member expressing their concerns about the funding cuts to VCAL, recommending reconsideration of these cuts and creating a new discussion prior to the 2012-2013 Victorian budget.

• You can also write directly to the Victorian Education Minister: martin.dixon@parliament.vic.gov.au expressing your concerns.

Check the website:

Facebook.com/saveVCAL

If the funding cuts are not reviewed and VCAL funding remains reduced, schools and other establishments need to reassess where funding can be redistributed across the school to enable VCAL to stay alive and well in their educational setting.

Alexis Leonhardt
VicSRC Student Executive member, Bundoora Secondary College

Tim Eric
VicSRC Student Executive member, Frankston High School
Supporting and Extending Student Voice: Vic

Student Leadership:
Kensington Community High School

Kensington Community High School (KCHS) is a small school in the inner north-west of Melbourne. We commenced a specific student leadership program in third term of 2010 and, since then, I have been in the leadership team.

Over the last 18 months we have managed to accomplish a few projects, and we are still working on a few more. For example, we were able to get lunchtime activities at the basketball court at the school running and that has been operating successfully during lunchtimes from Monday to Thursday. Some of the projects that we will be working on this year are introducing a non-compulsory school uniform, obtaining student identification cards and continuing the lunchtime activities.

We have also been involved in activities outside the school. We had students from the school who are in the leadership team attend the 2010 and 2011 National Young Leaders Day and I attended the VicSRC Congress in 2011 to represent my school. We also had a few of the students from the school run a stall at the multi-cultural hub on Elizabeth Street opposite the Queen Victoria market in the city.

One of our major achievements has been that we also now have a SRC representative on School Council. Getting that has been a successful process and has been a great experience. The school had been endeavouring to get a student on the School Council for a many years now, and since having a leadership group we have been successful at having a SRC representative there. Due to this position, we have been more successful at getting our voices as students heard by the Principal and teachers of the school and also by the parents’ and guardians of the students.

Since having a leadership team at the school we have been a great influence to the other students and have shown the teachers what the students are capable of. It has been a great pleasure working on projects on our Student Council and I am looking forward to working on future projects through our coming year.

Tamara Adnum
Meaningful Student Involvement: USA

Students as Education Advocates

Students are working change schools across the nation. They are bringing together students, parents, teachers, and community members to challenge apathy, indifference, and ignorance.

Possibilities for Students as Education Advocates

- Students organising public campaigns for school improvement
- Students joining existing school committees
- Students sharing documentation of the need for improving schools
- Students educating policy-makers about challenges in school
- Students informally presenting student perspectives to administrators

Examples of Students as Education Advocates

Student Action Fund

The Youth Leadership Institute in San Francisco, California engaged a group of students and educators in giving cash grants to teams of students and teachers. These teams took on challenges including increasing school attendance rates, building better relationships between teachers and students, and improving the ways students are taught, as well as the kinds of things they are learning.

No Age Limits

Barbara Lewis, a fifth-grade teacher in Salt Lake City, Utah, tells the story of her students at Jackson Elementary. These advocates have helped their elementary school reconstruct its library by researching, brainstorming, fundraising, giving speeches, lobbying, writing proposals and receiving local, state and federal support. Their efforts led to brand-new facilities and classes, flexible scheduling for increased library use, and a comprehensive technology system including a computer center and computers in every classroom.

Give Us a Bus to Get On

Student activists with an organisation called Sisters in Action for Power in Portland, Oregon developed a three-year campaign to lobby for free student bus rides to and from schools for students around the city. Their work led to the public transit company’s recent decision to allow free rides to high school students who qualify for free or reduced school lunches. Their next action includes battling for free service for all Portland high school students.

Tools for Students as Education Advocates

The Way We See It is a PBS program that features student-created videos about their perspectives of learning, schools, and education. (www.listenup.org/projects/education/stories.php)

Student Activism Map (www.soundout.org/activism.html)

Student Activism Success Stories (www.soundout.org/hopeactivism.html)

Student Advocacy Tools (www.soundout.org/organizinglibrary.html)

From: www.soundout.org/advocacy.html

Call for articles

Does your school have a Student Action Team or any similar student-led initiative running alongside or within your Kids Matter school initiatives?

Are you interested in writing up your experiences in building student voice to share with other schools?

As part of the lead up to the Kids Matter State conference on April 24 2012, Kids Matter is joining with Connect magazine to invite submissions for Connect. Articles of between 500 and 1500 words can be offered, and should next be submitted by the end of March. Photos or other graphics would also be most welcome.

Support and assistance with editing is available.

Queries can be directed to:

Connect:
r.holdsworth@unimelb.edu.au

Rob Mason,
Kids Matter Primary: rob.mason@pa.edu.au
What is Foxfire?

Foxfire is the name that an English class picked, in 1966, for a student-produced magazine they chose to create, containing stories and interviews gathered from elders in their rural Southern Appalachian [USA] community... [It] is the name of a series of books which are anthology collections of material from The Foxfire Magazine. The students' portrayal of the previously-dismissed culture of Southern Appalachia as a proud, self-sufficient people with simple beliefs, pure joy in living, and rock-solid faith shattered most of the world-at-large's misconceptions about these 'hillbillies.'

The success of the Foxfire program was due in large part to the fact that the students chose to create a magazine. Since the magazine was their choice, the students were deeply invested in the work of creating it. The magazine product itself was not the solution to classroom woes that so many teachers thought it would be. Kaye Carver Collins, an early magazine student and later a Foxfire staff member for 13 years, explained the problem like this: “It seemed that people couldn't understand the importance of the difference between the magazine, which was the choice we made, and the fact that we made a decision.”

In-house research and later years of grant-funded exploration sought to clarify the reasons for Foxfire's success and give teachers the help they were looking for. The original classroom model's three driving factors—student decisions directing the process, using the local community as a resource for learning, and providing an audience beyond the classroom for the students' work—were explored and expanded over time by practicing educators and Foxfire staff, resulting in the Foxfire Core Practices for Education, the basis of the Foxfire Approach to Teaching and Learning. Successful Foxfire-trained teachers in 38 states have discovered the enriching classroom experiences that can be had when students are empowered and truly invested in their work.

The Foxfire Approach

As Foxfire grew and gained national recognition, beleaguered teachers all across the country looked at The Foxfire Magazine, and saw an opportunity to change things. They started producing their own magazines in an attempt to “do Foxfire.” Most of these teachers met with partial or little success because they had missed the very heart of why Foxfire succeeded—student choice.

The Foxfire Core Practices

1 From the beginning, learner choice, design, and revision infuses the work teachers and learners do together.
2 The work teachers and learners do together clearly manifests the attributes of the academic disciplines involved, so those attributes become habits of mind.
3 The work teachers and students do together enables learners to make connections between the classroom work, the surrounding communities, and the world beyond their communities.
4 The teacher serves as facilitator and collaborator.
5 Active learning characterises classroom activities.
6 The learning process entails imagination and creativity.
7 Classroom work includes peer teaching, small group work, and teamwork.
8 The work of the classroom serves audiences beyond the teacher, thereby evoking the best efforts by the learners and providing feedback for improving subsequent performances.
9 The work teachers and learners do together includes rigorous, ongoing assessment and evaluation.
10 Reflection, an essential activity, takes place at key points throughout the work.

The Foxfire Fund has recently celebrated its 45th Anniversary with the publication of The Foxfire 45th Anniversary Book - see the website for details. Connect has earlier Foxfire publications - from their 20th and 25th anniversaries - available: see page 26.
NAB Schools First in 2012

NAB Schools First enters its fourth year in 2012 with $3 million available to 130 outstanding school-community partnerships. This year there will be 55 Impact Awards, 65 Seed Funding Awards and 10 Student Awards.

Applications open online at 9.00 am (AEST) on Monday, 5 March 2012 and close at 5.00 pm (AEST) on Friday, 29 June 2012. Student Award winners will be announced on Tuesday, 7 August 2012 while Impact and Seed Funding Award winners will be announced on Tuesday, 28 August 2012.

Visit the website for key dates and further details:
www.schoolsfirst.edu.au/

The NAB Schools First team will provide support to applicants throughout the application period. Applicants can contact the team with any questions they have around their submission for a NAB Schools First Award via:

Email: info@schoolsfirst.edu.au
Phone: 1800 649 141
(Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm)

Online Discussion Forum
The Online Discussion Forum will be open throughout the application period, from Monday, 5 March through to Friday, 29 June 2012. A response will be guaranteed within a few hours of question submission, allowing up to 48 hours on weekends. Answers to all questions will remain on the forum to assist applicants who have similar issues.

Second Strike Events Calendar 2012

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<td>SRC Teacher Adviser Professional Development Seminar - VIC – Primary</td>
<td>Primary – SRC/Junior School Council Teacher Advisers</td>
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<tr>
<td>28 March</td>
<td>SRC Teacher Adviser Professional Development Seminar - VIC – Secondary</td>
<td>Secondary – SRC Teacher Advisers</td>
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<td>23 April</td>
<td>Environment Captains Conference</td>
<td>Primary – Student Environment Captains</td>
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<td>26 April</td>
<td>JSC Congress - Hume Region (Benalla) - WC</td>
<td>Primary – SRC/JSC students in Hume Region</td>
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<td>7 May</td>
<td>Class Captains Conference</td>
<td>Secondary – Year 7 and 8 Class Captains</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 May</td>
<td>Class Captains Conference</td>
<td>Secondary – Year 7 and 8 Class Captains</td>
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<td>9 May</td>
<td>House Captains Conference</td>
<td>Secondary – Student House Captains</td>
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<td>30 May</td>
<td>SRC Teacher Adviser Professional Development Seminar – ACT – Primary and Secondary</td>
<td>Primary and Secondary – SRC Teacher Advisers</td>
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<td>SRC Teacher Adviser Professional Development Seminar - VIC – Secondary</td>
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<td>Secondary – SRC Teacher Advisers</td>
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Details from Second Strike
115a High Street, Kew 3101
www.second-strike.com
T: 03 9853 0600; F: 03 9853 0661; E: info@second-strike.com

Switched On To Learning Reprinted!

The Connect publication Switched On To Learning: Student Initiatives in School Engagement has now been reprinted and copies are available again from us (see Catalogue enclosed). This is a 52 page cartoon-style book for teachers and others, written by grade 4, 5 and 6 students from two Melbourne schools as an outcome of their Student Action Team investigating and acting to improve students’ engagement with school.

The initial print run of 500 copies (produced with the support of the CASS Foundation) sold out and Connect has reprinted copies and is making them available at the same low price.

Actually … there was an error on the cover of the first print run – and this has been corrected with this new printing. Can you pick it? If you can tell us what this error was, we’ll send you a (corrected) copy of Switched On To Learning absolutely FREE. E-mail us.
Kids Teaching Kids: River Health Conference

This documentary is the story of the journey of a group of students from Sacred Heart Primary School in Mildura as they prepare and present at the River Health Conference in Adelaide in 2011. Take Action. Think Frogs! was developed by students, with the guidance of their teacher, Rosemarie Zalec, along with mentor, Paula Robertson.

Five months of research and preparation went into the 2011 River Health Conference presentation, as documented in the film. This presentation - and that of the Conference as a whole, is based on the Kids Teaching Kids initiative, and their teacher has been a wonderful advocate for this approach.

The film was made by Sapphire Eyes Productions, and the film can be viewed online from their site: http://sapphireeyesproductions.wordpress.com/2011/12/10/take-action-think-frogs/ or from the HD link on their YouTube channel: http://youtu.be/lVog6_aABGg?hd=1

Be sure to click ‘Project Website’ and ‘Project Details’ below the video for more details. More details at: http://takeactionthinkfrogs.webs.com/

Sapphire Eyes Productions
www.sapphireeyesproductions.com/projects.htm

Learning and Teaching to Change the World

The Popular Education Network of Australia (PENA) is organising a two-day event on Friday-Saturday April 27-28, 2012 at Victoria University, Melbourne to talk about the relevance of the ideas and work of Paulo Freire to current education in Australia. It will be of relevance to all people interested in critical pedagogies, public pedagogies, popular education and education for social justice.

They ask: “Is Freire still inspiring educators and citizens? Can we or should we revive his ideas, complement them with others and/or contest them? Do we really understand the political nature of education in all its complexity? Would Freire help us to rethink democratic and educational engagement? How do we link the history of ‘good things’ in education - such as empowerment, liberation and social progress - with engagement, learning and dialogue?”

This is not ‘another conference’. It aims to move away from what Freire referred to as the ‘banking model’ of education. While there will be a public lecture from renowned popular educationalist Antonia Darder (Professor of Latina Studies Program in the Department of Educational Policy Studies, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA), the Saturday symposium will involve sessions and events led by participants: posing questions; telling stories; giving performances; offering workshops; leading role plays … and so on. Participants might be students, teachers, parents, educators, administrators, activists … citizens!

“Many people are passionate about education and have lots of experiences to draw on. However, schooling remains undemocratic, student achievement is stable at best and in decline at worst, and our students are bored at school. Somehow we do not know how to create a dialogue to forge real education change, driven by people and place.

“Is this the beginning of a conversation? We are not interested in another event where we are talked at and spoon-fed the ‘right’ answers. We are inviting people to interact, in real time, in one place and face to face!”

• All events are free, open to the public; formal papers will not be accepted/presented.
• To submit a contribution, go to www.populareducation.org.au or e-mail: symposium@populareducation.org.au
• Deadline for contributions: February 29, 2012
Connect Publications: Order Form

Tax Invoice: ABN: 98 174 663 341

To: Connect, 12 Brooke Street, Northcote VIC 3070 Australia
e-mail: r.holdsworth@unimelb.edu.au

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- ☐ supporting/sustaining subscriber $55 $110

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(Postage: Outside Australia add $10 pa to subscriptions and $5 per copy of publications $............)

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(§ check availability before ordering; * discounted rate for current and new subscribers to Connect)
ASPRINworld: the Connect website!
www.asprinworld.com/Connect

ASPRIN has a website at ASPRINworld; ASPRIN is the Australian Student Participation Resource and Information Network (“a cure for your student participation headaches”) – a still-emerging concept. The Connect section of the website is slowly growing, with information about subscribing, recent back issue contents and summaries of and order information for Student Councils and Beyond, Student Action Teams, Reaching High and Switched On to Learning. There are also links from the indexes of recent issues to their archived PDFs (see below).

Connect is now also archived and available electronically: research.acer.edu.au/connect

All issues of Connect are being archived through the ACER Research Repository: ACEReSearch. Connect issues from #1 to #180 are available for free download, and recent issues can be searched by key terms. See the ASPRINworld site for index details of recent issues, then link to and download the whole issue you are interested in.

www.informit.com.au

In addition, current and recent issues of Connect are now available on-line to libraries and others who subscribe to RMIT’s Informit site – a site that contains databases of many Australian publications. You can access whole issues of Connect as well as individual articles. Costs apply, either by a library subscription to Informit’s databases, or through individual payments per view for articles.

Local and Overseas Publications Received

Connect receives many publications directly or indirectly relevant to youth and student participation. We can’t lend or sell these, but if you want to look at or use them, contact us on:
(03) 9489 9052 or (03) 8344 9637

Australian:

Inspire (DEECD, Melbourne, Vic) Issue 11: December 2011; Issue 1: February 2012
Parents Voice (Parents Victoria, Wandong, Vic) Vol 38, Issue 5; December 2011
Research eLert (DEECD, Vic) December 2011
Student Advocate (VicSRC, Melbourne, Vic) Vol 6 No 1; February 2012
YAPRap (YAPA, Surry Hills, NSW) February-March 2012
Youth Studies Australia (Australian Clearinghouse for Youth Studies, Hobart, Tas) Vol 30 No 4; December 2011

International:

Rethinking Schools (Milwaukee, WI, USA) Vol 26 No 2; Winter 2011-2012
Student-Led School Improvement: Work, Findings, and Next Steps (Student Voice Collaborative, Children First Network 102, New York City Department of Education, USA) 2010-2011

Friends of Connect

By subscribing at a higher rate, the following have helped keep Connect going. We gratefully acknowledge receipt of the following contribution since the last issue of Connect:

Supporting Subscribers:
Jan Hargreaves Chapel Hill (Qld)

Is Your Connect Subscription Up-to-date?

The number on your Connect label tells you the issue with which your subscription expires. Please renew promptly - renewal notices cost us time and money!
Back issues of Connect from 1979 to 2010 (that’s 31 years!) are now all freely available on-line! Thanks to the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), back issues of Connect have been scanned or up-loaded and are now on the ACER’s Research Repository: ACEReSearch.

You can find these issues of Connect at:

research.acer.edu.au/connect

The left-hand menu provides a pull-down menu for you to select the issue number ... browse; the front cover of the issue is displayed, and you can simply click on the link in the main body of the page to download a PDF of the issue. Recent issues are also searchable by key words.

Availability

The last 12 months of Connect (ie the last 6 issues) will continue to be available ONLY by subscription. Issues will then be progressively added to this site and made freely available after that 12 month period.

This ensures that Connect maintains its commitment to the sharing of ideas, stories, approaches and resources about active student participation.

Let us know

There may be some gaps or improvements necessary. As you use this resource, let us know what you find. (But note that, if an issue of Connect seems to be missing, check the issues either side, as double issues show up only as one issue number.) If you have any ideas for improving this resource, please let us know.

Most importantly, please USE this resource.

Back copies of Connect are available on-line for free!

research.acer.edu.au/connect/