

Extracts from Townsville Case Studies

## Belgian Gardens

*“You learn about responsibility and if you care about other people... and if you should treat people the way you want to be treated” (Year 3 student)*

## Relationships

Some teachers commented they had noticed an increase in the numbers of students talking to students of different ages in the playground. Some also stated they had experienced an increase in informal exchanges, initiated by students with whom they had no formal relations, either through class membership or Peer Group supervision. Sometimes this might be no more than a greeting ‘in passing’ but one teacher added sometimes ‘in taking responsibility for wellbeing in the playground they might come to me for support’.

They also noticed more mixing of ages - ‘less segregation’, as one put it. They supported their claims with stories of incidents they had observed. Such interactions often involved Peer Leaders with children in Years 1 and 2, but one teacher related an incident in which a group of Year 5 students were looking after little ones.

Teachers and older students suggested this expansion of cross age interactions had a significant impact on younger students’ confidence, through a reduction of fear, especially of bullying. One student commented ‘they don’t have to be frightened of bigger children’. A teacher traced this back to Peer Support sessions, where ‘Year 1s fit in, join in... they’re not frightened to speak up’. Another suggested there had been a ‘remarkable change’ in age interaction had ‘helped ease transitions from Year 1 to 2’.

Older students’ comments appeared to indicate the greater interaction had enhanced their recognition and appreciation of younger students. Commenting on younger students’ contribution to Peer Support Group discussions, for example, one leader said ‘they come up with a lot of really good ideas I would never have thought of.’

Finally, comments by both student leaders and teachers indicate the program has resulted in enhanced respect for teachers, and quality of relations with teachers, as Peer Leaders have gained a better and more empathic understanding of the difficulties teachers face in dealing with *their* misbehaviour

## Personal Growth

The second most frequently mentioned perceived outcome of the program was personal growth of students (20 times). Among teachers, this arose more in relation to older students than younger ones; one commented:

*‘with older kids it’s more personal growth. With the younger ones it more learning about things outside themselves. But for the older ones it’s more learning about themselves’.*

In part, personal growth is seen to take the form of developing an applied knowledge of self management. For the senior students, teachers saw developments in:

*‘responsibility and preparation... there are problems when kids aren’t organised... Some are always very well prepared, but others [aren’t]... But even for them it’s good learning about the need to be prepared.’*

She added she saw this as valuable experience in preparing Year 7s for high school.

Peer Leaders and teachers both commented on the Peer Leaders' development of problem solving strategies and techniques, and in their confidence to tackle difficult situation as they arose. Teachers noted the program's impact not only on the normally 'good' students, but on what one described as 'the surprise packages': the transformation of some who were a 'major problem', and of quieter kids 'coming out'. Students (more than teachers, and mainly leaders) commented on the value for personal development in talking about feeling and emotions. Both Peer Leaders and teachers commented on the growth in confidence in younger students stemming from their interactions in groups with older children.

### **Values**

Values was the third most commonly raised theme (16 times). Values, including several of those embodied in the National Framework for Values Education were specifically mentioned in discussions of different aspects of outcomes and impact of the program: respect, acceptance, tolerance, individual worth, honesty, trust, responsibility.

They also saw the program acting as a form of values education in more general ways; teachers commented on the incorporation of values such as:

- *'what makes a good friend, what makes a good person'*,
- *'care, looking after others'*,
- *'diversity... valuing other people'*.

Even quite young children recognised a range of values being taught, and claimed they had learned about such things as responsibility and respect, being considerate to other people, and caring; as one Year 3 student expressed it:

*'You learn about... if you care about other people... and if you should treat people the way you want to be treated'.*

The Principal, Deputy Principal and several of the teachers noted the program deals with values both explicitly, in the formal content, and implicitly, embedded in the very practices through which the program runs: group-work, collaboration, sharing of ideas and affirmation of others. They saw it as having an impact not only on what students are able to say, but on their attitudes and behaviour: 'not just talking but doing'.

Some teachers and students also suggest part of the power of Peer Support Program as a form of values education, lies in the fact it is students rather than teachers talking about and attempting to model the values. One teacher, for example, said 'kids talking to kids about it is a lot more valuable than me talking about it.' Their discussions are [perceived as] more genuine *Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Belgian Gardens State School- Draft Case Study 15*. If it's the teacher talking about it they're thinking "what's she getting at now".' Another commented:

*'we need within the school culture to work towards kids reflecting on and taking ownership of their own values...There's always the problem of kids mouthing the correct answers, but Peer Support is more honest. They don't feel they can get into trouble for saying the 'wrong thing'...They don't dissemble because they feel a need to please'.*

Similarly, a Peer Leader explained:

*'it makes them think about the way they feel...it's better taught by kids, especially with the younger ones'.*

At the same time, the Principal and some teachers expressed the view the potential for using the Peer Support Program to teach about and cultivate values was still largely untapped potential. Indeed, the Principal suggested it had the potential to function as the lynchpin in the school's teaching of values

### **Taking Responsibility**

Staff and students also frequently referred to the increasing extent to which senior students, as Peer Leaders, were taking responsibility both within and beyond the program (14 times). While it is impossible to *demonstrate* the Peer Leader program contributes to this, all those who talked about this issue saw the Peer Support Program as a key contributor.

Teachers saw Peer Leaders taking responsibility primarily in relation to their Peer Support Group: in peer group, including, in some cases, a 'heavy commitment... to preparation for sessions'. Some also noted cases where students who were normally disruptive in class, or who had a history of disruptive behaviour in earlier grades 'stepping up' in Peer Support sessions. They also suggested Peer Leaders displayed 'more sense of ownership with the little ones' and 'taking responsibility for wellbeing in the playground'.

## Garbutt State School

[At this school] “It’s not a divided situation where this is what the **teachers** say and this is what the **children** are doing, so its not coming **down upon** the children; its **coming from** the children and together we proceed” (Teacher).

### Student cohesion and the development of social skills

Following the introduction of the Peer Support Program in 2000, staff describe the program’s almost immediate impact on the social cohesiveness of the school. The situation at the time, with some particularly difficult Year 7 students had led to a situation where staff were hesitant to complete playground duty and the general school atmosphere needed significant improvement. One teacher describes the situation as follows.

*When I first started here in 2000, we weren’t allowed to play in year levels, mixing year levels, ...as a result of fights in the playground. [...] I would be tentative to do playground duty (Teacher).*

Once the Peer Support Program was introduced however, school visitors often commented on the changed atmosphere.

*The best thing for me was we would have visitors to the school and they would say, “What have you done? What’s going on, gee this school feels nice.”(Teacher).*

Most staff referred to the need to view the impact of the Peer Support Program with a longitudinal perspective. Now five years on, all staff interviewed commented on the cohesion apparent in the playground. Recently appointed staff commented favourably on the school atmosphere, the lack of bullying or other anti-social behaviour in the school.

*“It’s one of the stand out things I have noticed since coming here. There are very few playground instances.” (Teacher).*

Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Garbutt State School - Draft Case Study 8

Students consistently described the ways in which the Peer Support Program had provided them with strategies to deal with bullying. All students interviewed could describe the actions they would take if bullied and were clear in their assertion bullying was now minimal in the school playground.

*We have learned how to play games, and how to take care of people when they get hurt (Year 4)  
We have a bully triangle, and you write stuff in it (Year 3 student).*

Staff also noted the impact on the school’s highly mobile population.

*Prior to Peer Support it was like a pecking process and if we had conflict it usually happened in the playground with new enrolments - Peer Support really addresses those issues - how do you make friends, how do you meet people so Peer Support has really assisted (Principal).*

While the impact of the Peer Support Program is apparent in these examples, the strong alignment between Peer Support, the Behaviour Management Framework and the school code of conduct has created an underlying school culture which fosters a particular set of values. Adults in the school community are asked to model a range of behaviours support the school’s ethic, giving coherence to the Peer Support Program’s aims. Staff in the school referred to this on a number of occasions during the interview process.

*“It’s not a divided situation where this is what the teachers say and this is what the children are doing, so its not coming down upon the children it’s coming from the children and together we proceed.” (Teacher).*

### Developing student identity

The Peer Support Program is seen as a part of, and an extension to, the school’s well-developed Cultural Studies program. The Cultural Studies teacher has consistently provided advice in relation to the implementation of the Peer Support Program in the school.

*A lot of what we wanted to put into Peer Support, came from our cultural background, who we are and who other people think we are, [dealing with] put 9 downs and negatives and [the Peer Support Coordinator] is able to address those issues because of what we do in Peer Support (Teacher). Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Garbutt State School - Draft Case Study.*

The Peer Support grouping strategy provides a vehicle to develop and extend concepts related to identity. One example of the link between these programs is an activity referred to as the 'language tree' where students were encouraged as part of a Peer Support lesson to use a home language and include a word in a community 'tree'. In such a diverse community, the peer groupings are seen to provide a safe place to explore identity and develop understanding and acceptance of diversity. As one teacher described

*[The] language tree - done in Peer Support groups was more powerful than in class groups. Remembering their ancestors.*

Additionally, staff recognise consistent modelling of a set of behaviours such as those used in the Peer Support Program supports a diverse community.

*The community members come and they see Peer Support happening and it's important to the wider community (Principal).*

The consistency of the Peer Support Program clearly supports the school's goals in relation to the development of student's cultural identity. One teacher commented while the school's cultural Studies program is renowned, with Indigenous teacher aides presenting strong role models to students, the effectiveness of it is sometimes hindered by fluctuations in teacher aide funding. The Peer Support Program however, is able to reliably support the development of student's self-identity given its relatively low cost.

### **Developing student leadership skills**

Staff describe the need to nurture the development of student leadership qualities in the context of the school community. One teacher commented the Peer Support Program along with other school experiences provide students' first insight into leadership roles.

*[The students are] seeing leadership and being part of leadership for the first time.*

*Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Garbutt State School - Draft Case Study*

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Some students had even questioned teachers about the rationale for being a leader. One teacher reported the following students comment.

*Why am I participating in Peer Support, why do I have to show leadership to the younger kids?*

The leadership roles are strongly promoted through a range of symbols including the leaders' shirts, contracts, and badges. In addition, the Peer Leaders organise the weekly parade, and administer the sports equipment at lunchtime. This strong celebration of leadership, alongside the allocation of clear leader roles conveys to both students and community members the importance of leadership and taking responsibility. A behaviour management process which withdraws leadership status if the code of behaviour is consistently breached reinforces this. If a breach occurs, the student's shirt is withdrawn, and the student is asked to develop a contract, with the support of another student in order to get the shirt back. This withdrawal strategy was strongly endorsed by students and according to teachers, by community members as well.

*The kids who have lost their shirt, (they lose it if they reach level three on the behaviour levels) if they lose their shirt, the parents I have had interactions with, have been really encouraging the kids to get them back (Teacher).*

The celebration of leadership within the school creates a palpable aspiration for students in Year 6. These students describe the range of tasks given to the Peer Leaders in an animated fashion, clearly looking forward to the next year, although they acknowledge managing the group will be a challenge.

Year 4 students too, describe with considerable regard, the skills of their Peer Leaders. They outline the management strategies used by their Peer Leaders and clearly state their respect for their leaders, indicating they work hard for their leaders. When asked why they work hard in Peer Support, one Year 4 student promptly replied as follows:

*Because they are our leaders (Year 4 student).*

### **Staff engagement with the core values of the program**

All staff interviewed, unhesitatingly supported the Peer Support Program and the way it was implemented in the school. The Peer Support Coordinator appears to systematically induct new staff to the program's aims and how it is implemented across the school. More importantly, the Coordinator provides a 7 page handout to staff includes a personal narrative outlining the rationale for the program in Garbutt State School. This induction material may explain the very high degree of understanding and acceptance of the program across the whole school despite only 2 current teachers having completed the formal Peer Support Australia training.

In addition to induction, the Peer Support Coordinator also provides a copy of the lesson to all staff. Teachers consistently articulated their roles in the program outlining their preparation of students prior to and following the lesson.

*[Peer Support Coordinator] sends the Peer Support lesson to the teachers before... and so the role of the teacher is to let the kids know what the lesson is about and have a little bit of a discussion before they go to the Peer Support lesson (teacher).*

*Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Garbutt State School - Draft Case Study 11.*

This consistent approach is reflected in student comments about staff commitment and engagement with the lesson content.

*The teachers always ask afterwards, what have you learned in your Peer Support lesson.*

Overall, the impression from the interviews is there is an exceptionally high degree of staff commitment to the Peer Support Program. Several staff noted all staff seemed committed to the program, and the following teacher quote sums up this commitment.

*I can't remember any barriers put up by staff - I can't remember any (Teacher).*

### **Peer Support Program - challenges/future directions**

With the enthusiasm of the staff for the program, future directions for the program were commonly articulated.

#### **1. Nurturing leadership roles**

While the leadership roles are clearly assigned, celebrated and nurtured within the school, extending an understanding of leadership beyond the school and into the community may be a priority for the program. Several Peer Leaders were able to describe the impact of their developing leadership skills on their family interactions. One student spoke of how he was able to use the 'rock' and 'water' response strategy learned on the leadership camp in their family setting, standing up to an uncle. This is potentially very powerful albeit challenging extension of the Peer Support Program.

Staff are already considering these broader concepts of leadership, with one teacher describing a vision to extend notions of leadership through an excursion to Canberra.

*A grand idea to take a class to Canberra, in winter, and go to the snow and go to Parliament, and AIS and Indigenous leaders. Being an excellent leader can lead on and you can aspire to be leaders in the broader community (Teacher).*

*Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Garbutt State School - Draft Case Study 12.*

## Magnetic Island State School

*“We do Peer Support.... to make kids understand life” (Year 6 student journal entry).*

Interview data revealed wide spread and generally strong support for the Peer Support Program from staff and students alike. Aside from enjoying many of the activities in the Peer Support sessions (building jack in a box and the tissue game for example), improved relationships between students were consistently reported as the key impact of the program. The Year 7 Peer Leaders were described by teachers as increasingly displaying **care** of the younger students, and taking higher levels of **responsibility** for their peers; younger students were described by both students and staff as showing **respect** for their Peer Leaders; and there was clear evidence the Peer Support process and lessons promoted **understanding** of self and others with increasing impact in the higher years. There were also outstanding examples of Peer Support contributing positively to whole school activities and overall organisation.

### Relationships and responsibility

Teachers cited a range of incidents where Peer Leaders took responsibility to ensure differences were resolved in constructive and non violent ways. Although staff commented the culture of a smaller school often created a positive environment, differences were noted following the introduction of the Peer Support Program. The following teacher comments are indicative of this improvement.

*“There were two Grade One kids and they were really flighty and were running around after morning tea and one of the kids yelled out....so I got the Peer Leaders (X and Y) to go and stop A and B.”*

*“Kids are skipping and they can’t turn the rope then the Peer Support group will step in.”*

*“The little kids look to the older kids in their group- definitely a better connection than before.”*

Teachers also observed changed behaviour of students within the Peer Support lesson time, generally demonstrating more self regulated behaviour.

*Students who don’t always behave in the classroom, still have problems in their Peer Support lesson but they seem to be a lot less pronounced. They are probably more willing to participate in the lessons when their peers are leading than being told by the teacher.*

*Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Magnetic Island State School - Draft Case Study 8.*

Students too identified new types of relationships forming as a result of the multi age Peer Support grouping. Students also commented on the overall impact on the learning environment, noting improvements in overall behaviour. The following students’ comments demonstrate this perceived enhancement.

*It’s a good way to make new friends, get to know people you wouldn’t know before (Year 4).*

*Before I was in my Peer Support group I didn’t know (X) ... X has taught me a lot. (Year 4).*

*“When I came they were all fighting but the Peer Leader taught us about cooperation or not participating” (Year 6).*

*It’s stopped people going up to the office a little tiny bit (Year 4).*

### Understanding of self

Staff generally expressed reservations about the learning students could take away from the Peer Support lessons, especially in the younger ages. While the Peer Support Program was described as having an important social value, the concepts or values underlying each lesson were often described as too difficult for the younger children. However, long term involvement in the program was deemed to be beneficial.

Despite the teacher’s reservations, students above Year 2 level made a range of insightful comments about the ways Peer Support had contributed to their understanding of themselves. This comment

from a Year 3 student highlights the articulate and concrete way the students described their learning.

*We learned about 'positive self talk'. If you get something wrong you don't go off and say damn I hate myself now, you just go off and say well better luck next time. Like if I get words wrong in journal and stuff (Year 3).*

*Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Magnetic Island State School - Draft Case Study 9.*

Staff were unanimous in their view the Year 7s underwent considerable personal growth as a result of the Peer Support Program. This was particularly obvious following the leadership camp. One teacher commented the school community now anticipated the camp as a catalyst for improved student behaviour. Notably staff not involved in the camp expressed a desire to know more about the camp activities - what was involved etc.

The Peer Leaders were consistent in their praise of the activities and acknowledged a wide range of newly acquired skills. Specifically, students referred to the helium balloon activity as extremely powerful. The following are indicative student comments revealing high levels of personal growth.

*Learn to deal with other people. When (John) came I had trouble controlling him, but I learned to be assertive and now I have lots of different strategies.*

*We learn about our strengths and differences (Year 7).*

*We learned about how others feel when they come into Peer Support (Year 7).*

*[Peer Support helps you to learn] to feel positive instead of negative about yourself (Year 7).*

*We learned to feel happy about yourself and who you are and what you can do (Year 7).*

*[We learned] not to be upset about who you are or any problems you have (Year 7).*

### **Whole school organisation**

The interview data revealed the degree to which *Peer Support* had impacted on school organisation. Key school transition points and whole school activities now reflect the success of the Peer Support Program.

The school recently introduced Peer Support as part of the transition strategy for preschool students. Year 6 students are allocated a preschool student as a buddy. On graduation to Year 7, this same buddy pair is placed together in a Peer Support group. This transition strategy promoted leadership and caring qualities in the Year 6 student, and eased the transition for the preschool student. *Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Magnetic Island State School - Draft Case Study 10.*

Teachers also provided two examples of Peer Support groupings being used to operate whole school events - the *Tabloid Sports* day and the *Reef Guardian* activity visiting various bays. These events were recalled as outstanding successes with Peer Leaders demonstrating high levels of responsibility and the group members highly respectful of the Peer Leaders authority. The following teacher comment summarises this success.

*"it was the best tabloid sports we have ever had and it was because...the teachers had to do very little the Peer Support leaders would organise their kids into the activities."*

A further impact of Peer Support Program across the wider school community was also noted. Students were asked whether they talked to their parents/family generally about school activities or the Peer Support Program in particular. All Year 7 students indicated the preparation they were required to complete at home for the Peer Support lessons consistently promoted conversations with family members. This was the case for both the strategies for working with younger students (where they sought advice from their parents) and the concepts to be taught each lesson. From the interview data it would appear students talked more about Peer Support than many other aspects of school life.

Two teachers saw at least an indirect impact of the program in promoting responsibility through a change in the way the 'senior leaders' badges were awarded. One noted whereas the badge had traditionally been awarded to all Year 7 students, with no particular obligations or responsibilities, it now had to be earned, via the notion of 'readiness' for the badge, and an association of the badge with 'privileges and responsibilities'. She explained:

*'It has to mean something - I'm a leader - and students now write their own contract.'*

The other commented it is:

*'a fantastic thing for older students to take on. It's one thing to have a badge but another to have responsibility. It's empowering, it gives ownership.'*

Teachers, and some students, also saw the program having an impact in cultivation aspirations to leadership across the Year levels. At a senior level, one teacher related the example of two boys who were frequently badly behaved but who wanted to be involved as Peer Leaders:

*'They've worked hard to qualify... they've become more responsible. They're also doing homework, etc.'*

Teachers noted some Year 6 students are already taking on leadership roles and responsibilities, and some of the Peer Leaders were particularly adept at getting Year 5 and Year 6 group members involved in Group activities by sharing responsibility with them.

One teacher saw the way Peer Leaders, especially, were taking on more responsibility and becoming 'role models' within the school, as having a quite broad impact. This had an effect of:

*'Establishing a culture of values in the school... and younger children see and strive towards'.*

This sense of a growing 'culture of values' was reflected quite generally in the interviews with Peer Leaders and some of the Year 6 students: underpinning much of their talk is taken for granted the assumption students - especially older students - ought to take responsibility. *Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Belgian Gardens State School - Draft Case Study 17.*

A sub theme in the comments on the impact of the Peer Support Program and student responsibility concerned the ways Peer Leaders exercised their leadership roles. Teachers and students commented on the way Peer Leaders worked cooperatively, sharing work and responsibilities not only between themselves but with others in their groups. One leader suggested they had an important communicative role and they were sometimes better able to explain the importance of the concepts and values formed part of the Peer Support Program because

*'It's more than just having a teacher tell you... its being able to think with the 'mind of a child'.*

One teacher, in particular, made a point of commenting it was not a 'bossy' style, but a 'softer' more collaborative mode of leadership. When one student said he enjoyed being a Peer Leader because he could be bossy, everyone laughed at the joke. More significantly, perhaps, what they *claimed*, is what their comments *revealed* about their leadership. When they described what it meant to be a leader they talked about problem solving, the need to be organised and attentive to others. Their comments recognised and affirmed the worth of others, especially younger students ('They come up with a lot of really good ideas I would never have thought of'), and they related incidents in which they shared responsibilities with others. Their taking up of leadership in terms of *helping* rather than 'bossing' is typified in the story related by one Peer Leader. A group of Year 7 students, all Peer Leaders, were approached during lunch by a younger student, leading an even younger child with a grazed knee.

*"Excuse me... he grazed his knee. Can you help him". So you give it a wash, give it a rub and he's ok. He really just needed a bit of TLC'.*

## Behaviour

While Behaviour Management was one of the most commonly perceived reasons for introducing the Peer Support Program into the school, it ranked only fifth among the interview themes identifying impacts of the program. This does not reflect any lack of confidence the program is serving to enhance the school's behaviour management strategy. I have noted already the Principal's and Deputy Principal's belief the program had already had a significant impact in reducing behavioural problems. Classroom teachers and students alike shared their views. *Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Belgian Gardens State School- Draft Case Study 18.*

In the context of the Peer Support group sessions, and the recruitment of Peer Leaders, teachers related several instances of 'dramatic improvement' in children who had been 'major problems', and who moderated their behaviour in order to participate fully in the program. One of these involved a child whose behaviour reflected his low levels of achievement in class, but who was able to experience a sense of success as a Peer Leader in Peer Group sessions. Another teacher commented:

*'We had great fear for [2005's incoming Year 7s] behaviourally... but it hasn't turned out that way... I think 's a result of senior leader program of which PS is large part'.*

At the same time, one teacher pointed out, improvements in behaviour within the Peer Group session did not always translate into the 'normal' classroom.

Some teachers also saw the Peer Support Program having an impact on behaviour more broadly, or more diffusely, through improvements in the quality of relations and attitudes, the greater sense of responsibility and ownership among senior students, and the development of more positive techniques for problem solving and dealing with issues. They saw this both as reducing the incidence of bullying, and as providing more protective resources when bullying occurred. The Deputy Principal related the reduction of students being placed on the Behaviour Management Plan's 'Steps' to the role of Peer Support in providing a mode of reasoning about behaviour which might have been implicit but was not explicit in the Plan itself.

Both staff and students interviewed saw these positive developments in the school as at least partly attributable to the Peer Support Program. Teachers, in particular, commented about what they saw as an already noticeable difference in the atmosphere of the school, and its potential for even greater impact over the medium to long term. Children across the year levels commented they felt the program had led to more comfortable relations between younger and older students and this had contributed to making the school a better place.

## Oonoonba State School

*I reckon they should definitely, like 100%, have Peer Support at high school (Year 6 student).*

### Qualitative data

In addition to the review of school documents, interviews provided insight into the degree to which the Peer Support Program is transforming some aspects of the school. A number of areas can be noted as significant here, including the high degree of staff enthusiasm and involvement in the program, the development of inclusive student relationships, and the support the program provides for the primary to secondary school transition stage. Each of these areas is discussed below.

### Staff engagement and commitment to the program

The school has low staff mobility with many staff having tenure long enough to make comparisons between the two school sites. The Peer Support trained staff now teach in a range of year levels, and this, along with the consultative way in which the program was introduced, may explain the overt support for the program across the spectrum of school staff interviewed.

For new staff, despite receiving no formal induction (there is also no mention in the *Teacher Handbook*), the weekly discussions in the staff meeting have created a reasonable sense of how the program needed to operate across the school. One of the newer staff members wholeheartedly endorsed the program, despite initially not being sure of her role during the lesson time. Her comment follows.

*[It's] part of my philosophy, PEERS teaching PEERS (teacher).*

*Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Oonoonba State School - Draft Case Study 8.*

Several staff commented there had been an increase in “teacher talk” about the program recently. Some staff had expressed concern the:

*Program went on a bit of a dive at one stage (Teacher).*

As one teacher wryly acknowledged, the staff moved to get some positive self talk amongst teachers “lets stick it out”(Teacher).

These recent staff conversations had led to a revision of the lesson format. Staff were now asked to take the first few minutes of each Peer Support lesson, in essence modelling the introduction to the lesson’s concepts and making links to previous learning. One teacher also described how she now modelled a lesson conclusion each week, reiterating the core concepts and praising success. This modelling was thought to support the Peer Leaders. In fact this is built into the sessions developed by Peer Support Australia. Although no time frame appears to have been put in place to handover these segments to the students, staff were unanimous this involvement had improved the operation of the weekly lesson.

Several staff described their preparation of students for each lesson. Briefing and debriefing students before and after as suggested by Peer Support Australia are critical components for the program’s success. As one teacher suggests, her weekly prepping of her students was visible when observing their responses in group tasks.

*I notice in my two groups, my Year Xs are putting their hands up - they know what they are talking about because I have talked about it beforehand.*

In addition to this “teacher talk” around program improvement, several teachers outlined how they were able to draw on the concepts within the program to support their own class’ operations or the operation of the Peer Support lesson.

Using the Peer Support language was seen to turn around inappropriate behaviours, particularly with students who have challenging behaviours.

*In Peer Support I can use the Peer Support language with kids. I can bring them around, if they are saying things which aren't appropriate, I can use the Peer Support language "is positive self talk. Is this going to help you get the activity done, saying you can't do it"? Show me.*

Other staff explained how they incorporated the language of Peer Support in their classroom. *Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Oonoonba State School - Draft Case Study 9.*

*I can cue the kids in. I can say, you used perseverance then, (Teacher).*

In addition to this willingness by teachers to incorporate the language and concepts, several staff commented on the Principal's modelling of the concepts during assembly. Staff cited a recent assembly where the Principal and a teacher had modelled bullying. Two teachers indicated this had been very powerful for their student cohorts.

These examples indicate even after a relatively short period of time, the Peer Support Program is highly regarded by staff, and perceived as compatible with both the overall philosophy of the school and teachers' personal practice. Such endorsement creates a high degree of possibility for the program to be quickly embedded in the overall school culture.

### **Student learning about themselves and others**

Most students interviewed appeared very positive about the Peer Support Program. When the students were asked what they learned in the Peer Support Program, a range of responses were quickly provided. Here is a sample of the responses.

*Learning about bullying.*

*Helping young kids.*

*Make new friends.*

*Working cooperatively in a group.*

*You learn about cooperation, consideration and respecting other people.*

*Positive self talk - talking to yourself in a good way.*

*You have got to keep trying.*

*Learning about other people and be self controlled.*

*Teaches you how to work as a team.*

Teachers of the younger grades believed most students thoroughly enjoyed the experience of Peer Support. The Year 1 students were reported to excitedly view each Tuesday - "It's Peer Support today!"

Other younger grade teachers believed students were happy to work in mixed aged groupings.

*I know when the big kids come into my room to get the little kids, it's all hellos, and the big kids fuss over the little kids and the little kids' faces light up when the big kids walk in.*

*Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Oonoonba State School - Draft Case Study 10.*

In addition to these positive responses, younger year teachers were able to describe how students were internalising the concepts and using the language.

*I can see now, even Year 1 the students are using language, "I persevered in this activity or you are bullying me you're not making me feel very good (Teacher).*

Both teachers and students described changed playground behaviour since the introduction of the Peer Support Program. These student comments highlight this perceived change.

*Everyone is all mixing up now.*

*Everyone knows everyone else's name. There used to be a lot more bullying.*

For teachers who had been involved with the school prior to its relocation, the Peer Support Program was seen as partly restoring the sense of student cohesion not seen after the move. These teacher comments are indicative of this changed playground tone.

*Students are drifting between the designated play areas, since Peer Support.*

*I have noticed now since Peer Support the little kids are coming over and finding the older kids, or the older kids are walking around with the younger ones. Or they find a mutual area (Teacher).*

Several students described their relationships with the younger students in quite animated ways.

*All the little kids and all the bright faces looking up at you (Year 7 leader).*

*In the playground they are screaming at you and coming up to hug you (the younger kids). Year 7 Leader*

*You learn to be their friend, you find about them (Year 7).*

Teachers perceived the peer grouping as mirroring real world relationships students would be required to negotiate in the workplace in later life. As one teacher explained, the program

*teaches students to work with students they wouldn't necessarily work with themselves. An early exposure to real life (Teacher).*

*Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Ooononba State School - Draft Case Study 1.*

The students described the range of ways they have learned to use to include the students from the special education unit. These strategies included using rattles, speaking slowly, and ensuring time was provided for students to complete the activities. In addition to these specialist skills, the Peer Leaders articulated how the experience of Peer Support had provided strategies for dealing with family members at home. One student reported

*I have learned not to bash my brother. I just don't want to get involved anymore.*

### **Supporting transitions**

In addition to supporting students' understanding of peers and other family members, the schools active participation in two professional clusters has provided an opportunity to expand the program's influence to the feeder high schools.

Last year the school implemented a transition program to support student movement to William Ross High School. The "Changing Tracks" program developed in association with the Tropical Public Health Unit supports student transition to secondary school by the completion of modules in both primary and secondary sites. While not intentionally designed as an extension to the Peer Support Program, the concepts of resilience and anti-bullying are the focus of both programs.

This intentional cross sector development will clearly be valued by students who can already articulate the ways in which Peer Support will support their transition to secondary school. One student described how he would use positive self talk if he did not get into the secondary school specialist soccer program.

*Positive self talk - like if you don't get in the Rhinos.*

Another student commented he would know how to avoid conflict, while others discussed how they would deal with any bullying arose, or seek out new friendships, or how the program had helped them become more organised. These comments indicate the ways in which spoke about their skills

*I will know not to get into a fight.*

*If you need to make new friends, I will know to go and say Hi I'm X what's your name.*

Indicative of the esteem with which the students interviewed viewed the Peer Support Program is the following comment.

*Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Ooononba State School - Draft Case Study 12.*

## Railway Estate State School

*‘There’s this one year oner... and he’s really shy, and he gets bad tempered when people aren’t saying anything to him and he feels like only his Peer Leader can help him.’ (Year 7 Peer Group Leader, focus group discussion).*

Interview data indicated wide spread and generally strong support for the program from staff and students alike. Students reported they enjoyed many of the activities in the Peer Support Program, in particular, the games. Teachers interviewed commented on the improved tone of the school and related incidents where they saw students demonstrating care for each other, in particular older students caring for younger ones. These data are difficult to discuss in an orderly fashion as they are tightly interwoven, and difficult to separate, or to discuss under separate headings without repetitiveness. Nevertheless, there appear to be five broad headings under which data indicated the program might be having some effect in the school: *Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Railway Estate State School - Draft Case Study 12.*

### 1. Students’ responses to the program

Most of the students interviewed said they enjoyed the program. Teachers, too, considered the majority of students enjoyed it. A Year 1 teacher commented for her class Peer Support was something they looked forward to, and regarded it as the activity which made Tuesdays a special day.

Staff also stated many students had initially been ‘wary’ and guarded in their participation but had over time become far more active participants. They also saw the response of some of the older ‘hardheads’ as indicative of the overall high standing of the program in students’ eyes. Thus, for example, one referred to:

*‘Macho little [...], a real leader among the kids. He pulled out early in the piece. Now he’s come around to wanting to [be part of it] because some of his mates [as leaders] are doing a good job, and getting the accolades for it, too... and he’s not getting the recognition he’d like’.*

Another teacher commented about a child who was being disruptive in one of the groups she supervised.

*‘He was purposely doing anything to annoy. We tried to work with him, and finally we decided we needed a break from him. And he couldn’t wait to get back in’.*

Others were less convinced, however. Peer Leaders commented some Year 6 and 7 students, in particular, felt the program was rather ‘uncool’ and remained disengaged. One commented ‘some treat it as big joke, time off school’. Some of the younger students commented they found some of the activities boring. I return to this matter below, in discussing possible futures for the program in the school.

### 2. Students’ understanding

When they talked about the program most students focused on the games and other activities. When asked ‘what it was about’, even children in lower years were able to give clear and coherent descriptions of activities, their purposes and the ideas behind them, as well as of the relations between the activities and the ideas. Their responses included words and phrases such as respect, helping, making people feel better, and taking care of other people.

Comments by members of the Year 4 -5 group interviewed, concerning the session for the week 1 was in the school - on ‘special place’ - illustrate their understandings:

First student: *‘Its an imaginary place’*

Interjection: *'It doesn't have to be imaginary'.*

First student: *'where you feel safe'. 'You have to keep it in your heart... for when you're upset or lonely'.*

*'It's about peacefulness... it helps you be calm'.*

*Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Railway Estate State School - Draft Case Study 13.*

Such comments indicate they have a good understanding of both the purpose of the program and of its content. This seems noteworthy, given both teachers and Peer Leaders commented on how difficult some of the ideas are. Further, while most comments were about the more recent Peer Group lessons, some discussed or referred to ideas and activities from considerably earlier in the program.

Not surprisingly, the level of understanding was not uniform, but varied across ages, between individuals within the same age group, and in relation to different topics and activities. For several children, 'special place' translated into 'a place you like;' or 'a really cool place', which did not appear necessarily to capture the *point* of the exercise, as it was explained to me. One Peer Leader confessed sometimes the ideas were so difficult 'even we don't get it'. Another noted 'some activities are boring so they don't want to remember it [the idea of the lesson]' while another admitted sometimes they didn't get the activities completed in time to draw out the main issues the session was meant to address.

### 3. Behaviour and relationships

Teachers commented they felt the Peer Support Program was already having a visible effect on student behaviour and relationships in the playground, and relates a number of incidents which they felt demonstrated this, including the following on the basketball court:

*The little kids were throwing hoops down one end and the big kids were managing to keep down the other end, or there are a couple of older ones showing the little ones. I was on duty and there was one little girl standing right in the middle, and I [called her to come off]. I turned around and starting to walk off expecting her to follow me. And I turned around and she was still standing there and I said "come on, come on". And the bigger girls said to me "she's been hit on the head", as if to say "Don't be so tough"... and was sort of caring protective behaviours perhaps wouldn't have been seen five years ago, sort of cross age behaviour... has come more and more since Peer Support'.*

*Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Railway Estate State School - Draft Case Study 14.*

Peer Leaders were less confident it had such an impact. One commented, with murmurs of agreement from others, it really wasn't cool to spend time with smaller children:

*'I don't think the bigger kids like doing things with little kids - it's a bit "kiddie.'*

They felt there was not much extension of the cross age relationships from Peer Group to the playground. Nevertheless, they too related stories of incidental contacts and conversations among children of different ages. From their comments it appears the most 'intense' contacts are between Year 1 children and their Peer Leaders, with little ones approaching the Peer Leaders and hugging them. The Leaders' responses appeared ambivalent; they stated this was 'a bit too much', yet, at the same time, my impression was they felt pleased.

Another possible indicator the Peer Support Program might be having an impact on student behaviour included comments by both teachers and students of varying ages (apart from what one teacher described as 'a few hardheads') the bulk of behavioural difficulties, both in Peer Support Program and in the school more generally, arose with 'new kids'. The clear implication was those who had been there longer had absorbed the Peer Support Program ethos and had already softened their behaviour.

Apart from 'behaviour' in its usual relation to *misbehaviour*, there was another important sense in which it appeared the program was having an effect on the behaviour of Peer Leaders. Both in the Peer Group session I observed and in the briefing and debriefing session the Peer Leaders were working very hard to articulate and explain quite difficult concepts, and they were deeply engaged in the processes of reflection and self regulation the program appears calculated to foster. Moreover, their conduct as Peer Leaders in their group sessions appear to reflect the values of the program: they were considerate, sought to resolve difficulties by discussion and request rather than by resort to authority or threat. *Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Railway Estate State School - Draft Case Study 15.*

Further, the teachers interviewed all commented there had been greater difficulties in the first year than in the second. In part, they attributed this to differences in characteristics of the two successive senior groups of students; in part they attributed it simply to the fact this year's leaders had the advantage of taking up their roles having already experienced the program. However, they also considered the longer involvement in the program of this year's leaders had already had an impact on them and their conduct.

#### **4. Impact on responsibility, personal growth and sense of wellbeing**

The Program stresses resilience, sense of Self, connectedness, sense of possibility, responsibility, all of which relate to issues of personal growth and wellbeing. Such matters are by their nature difficult to measure. However, there were many references to such qualities in the interviews, especially with teachers; their comments and stories about incidents, and some of the students' own comments provided signs these were showing up in children. Further, while it is impossible to assess the extent to which the program might be contributing to any such changes, both the Principal and the teachers interviewed were confident it was a significant factor.

Discussion of increased student responsibility focused on Peer Leaders. One teacher commented in general terms Peer Leaders take their roles 'very seriously', while others told stories about the work they did in preparing and the seriousness with which they led their group sessions. These comments were borne out in Leaders' comments about their preparation for sessions; from their descriptions of what they did, it was clear several of them, at least, put considerable time, energy and care into it. Their discussions also revealed the thoughtfulness with which they approached the challenges of group leadership, and in my observation of their actual work in their groups. *Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Railway Estate State School - Draft Case Study 16.*

As a sign of their determination to fulfil their Peer Support Program responsibilities, one teacher referred to the way they 'battle it out even when it's difficult':

*'a lot feel they have to carry on regardless without having to seek help.'*

One teacher saw student's own suggestions and attempts to solve the issues first, as really important:

*'They are reluctant to call for help... It puts them under enormous pressure but calls forth all their problem solving initiative.'*

Teachers' 'non interventionist' approach to Peer Groups sessions indicated they were quite prepared to trust Peer Leaders to take responsibility, and from my observation as well as teachers' comments, Peer Leaders fulfilled this expectation well. As one teacher put it, Peer Leaders are 'prepared to do bit more, go a bit further'.

There were also some indications other students were informally taking on leadership roles within the program. One Leader, for example, noted one of the Year 6 students in her group 'kind of acts like the Co-leader and the Peer Leader doesn't really act like one'. (This comment of course, also testifies to the unevenness with which the formal leaders fulfil their responsibilities.)

Despite claims Peer Leaders were expected to exercise leadership within the school more generally, outside the Peer Support Program itself, neither teachers nor students made more than the most passing or incidental references to examples of such leadership. However, one sign of how their Peer Leader role might be translating into a more general role modelling might be found in the comments of younger students, who described them as 'good' and 'cool'; equally significantly, perhaps several of them clearly aspired to be Peer Leaders when they reached Years 6 and 7 themselves.

Evidence for the impact of the Peer Support Program on personal growth and wellbeing took two main forms. First, inferring personal change underlying changes in behaviour. Thus, stories such as cited already in which children were seen to display 'caring protective behaviour' are seen as signs of underlying attitudes and dispositions to *be caring people*. Second, interpreting children's manner, attitudes and expressions of confidence. Thus, teachers refer to students 'seeming more confident' or 'being more confident'. Such 'evidence' for the impact of the program is very 'soft' and points to the importance of finding stronger ways of assessing the program's impact. Whatever the limitations of this evidence, it pointed to significant signs the program might be having some effect in these areas. *Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Railway Estate State School - Draft Case Study 17.*

Discussions with Peer Leaders also provided evidence of personal growth, reflected in increasing confidence in exercising their leadership within the Program. Another key sign of growth in Peer Leaders was their capacity to deal constructively with situations and to take a mature approach to leadership. There were few signs or reports of bossiness by leaders, a clear indication of their adoption of a constructive leadership rather than an authoritarian model of leadership.

Senior students' comments about what they found valuable about being Peer Leaders also reflect a level of maturity I found surprising: 'helping', 'doing stuff with little kids'; and 'seeing people become friends with other people'. Several commented on their changed perceptions of teachers and appreciation of the difficulties teachers face: 'you get to see what it's like to be a teacher, like a teacher aide'; 'see things from a teachers' point of view'. Teachers commented on the significance of these latter comments:

*'It's good for the leaders and support leaders - especially those who tend to be a bit feisty themselves - having to deal with the discipline involved... to be in the teachers' shoes... It's an important learning lesson for those kids.'*

Some of these were 'attention seekers', and the process of inducting them into leadership was 'an uphill battle'; but teachers claimed even (especially?) with these children 'we could see amazing progress' and there was 'a major growth in confidence'.

Another sign of personal growth is the development of constructive approaches to, and skills in, solving problems. Peer Leaders talked about a range of strategies they use to address problems within their groups, in particular problems of disruptive behaviour and disengagement from the activities, and their contributions to the briefing/debriefing sessions revealed more: rewards (what one candidly described as 'bribes') to get cooperation, consequence cards, time outs, and a variety of modifications of the scripted program to make sessions more appealing, making it 'a bit less strict'. One explained 'sometimes I do the dull stuff first and save the best till last', and another added, 'if you finish early you can play a game'. Within the scripted program they talked about, and I observed, the pairing of students for various activities and purposes. *Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Railway Estate State School - Draft Case Study 18.*

Teachers commented on personal organisation and self management as aspects of personal growth, and saw this evident among Peer Leaders in 'their increased levels of self organisation... [making] a major contribution to [their] preparation for high school'. And they cited examples of children who were not expected to step up, including one particular student who struggled with normal classroom learning activities but who had 'grown' into being an excellent leader. More generally, and especially in relation to younger children teachers commented they saw them 'blossoming' and 'shining' through the program.

There are clearly exceptions, of course, to these success stories; I have noted already some lost their leadership positions, Peer Leaders commented some 'don't do it effectively', and one Year 4-5 student talked about one who 'walks around like she's top dog'. Overall, however, it appears many students, but senior students in particular, have shown significant personal growth through the Peer Support Program.

'Resilience' and 'a sense of wellbeing' are difficult to pin down or demonstrate; however, it is not so difficult to show examples of the contexts and conditions which might be expected to promote these, and to relate these to the Peer Support Program. Thus, for example, a teacher related an interaction she had noticed in the 'special place' session:

*'When the leader asked "what did you see in your head", one little boy answered, "I saw black".'*

Even though this was hardly a sign of a sense of wellbeing, the teacher saw it as an important opportunity for this child who, she noted, was having 'a really hard time' to express such feelings.

*'We have a program allows kids to say and the leader was there with him explaining to him...'*

More generally, as another teacher put it,

*'You've got that care factor with the older children and the younger children working together.'*

This is facilitated by the fact Peer Leaders 'don't use stand over tactics' but are encouraged to take - and are inducted into - a more explanatory, sharing, communicative approach to their groups. Teachers described Peer Leaders as being especially helpful in dealing with children who were shy, 'little', isolated or new to the school. *Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Railway Estate State School - Draft Case Study 19.*

Drawings in one Year 1 child's Peer Support Program notebook seemed indicative of the impact of the program on child's sense of wellbeing: the picture on the cover, drawn before the commencement of the program, showed figures with flat or jagged, unsmiling mouths. Every figure inside the book, in the pictures drawn following weekly peer group session was wearing a smile. Further, the picture following the session on 'respect' (and headed with the teacher's translation of the 'message') showed figures holding hands, linking respect to another of the program's themes: connectedness.

Peer Leaders themselves displayed some scepticism about the impact of the program on students, their capacity to use it to give them greater self control, resilience and so on. In interviews following the 'special place' activity, and after they had explained what the exercise was about ('It gives them a safe place to go to when they're angry or upset') I asked whether they thought members of their groups would make use of their own special places later. Three replied, one after another:

*'Some might. Some don't really think much at all. Most of them just get angry and.'*

*'It could be helpful, but I don't see them doing it.'*

*'They won't, because they don't find it interesting. They think it's a bit silly.'*

## 5. Values

Much of the foregoing discussion testifies to the role of the Peer Support Program in teaching about, and cultivating values endorsed in the *National Values Framework*. Values which appear explicit in the program include: *Care and compassion, Respect, Responsibility and Understanding Tolerance and Inclusion*. It can also be argued the remaining five values are implicit in the Peer Support Program and process.

Both the Principal and the teachers interviewed were clearly aware of the *National Values Framework*, and equally clearly endorsed the values it enshrined. They saw connections between those values, their teaching, and the Peer Support Program. As noted already the program is further tied to the *National Values Framework* through its relation to the Behaviour Management Plan, which was reviewed explicitly in light of the *Values Framework*. *Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Railway Estate State School - Draft Case Study 20*.

The convergence of the *National Values Framework* and Peer Support Program was clear in many of the comments teachers made about Peer Support as it operates in the school; their descriptions of its goals and effects included, respect, connectedness, responsibility, tolerance and fairness. Students, too, used the same or similar terms: most of these terms, respect, responsibility, tolerance, peacefulness and kindness in describing what they thought the program taught them. They demonstrated their understanding by the ways they 'translated' the terms more concretely - 'helping people', 'being kind to people', 'looking after people when they're sad/lonely', 'taking care of other people', 'being able to cooperate with your friends - and with people who aren't your friends, too'.

It is important such values not remain simply as words but be translated into attitudes and practices. Whether or not they can be attributed to the Peer Support Program or not, some of the behaviours noted above are signs the values endorsed by the *National Values Framework* are finding their way into the behaviour of many of the children in this school.

## Townsville Central State School

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

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

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

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

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

These examples, while not exhaustive, are clear indicators of ‘whole school’ impact of the Peer Support Program. All interviewees, including recently appointed staff noted the positive culture of the school as a distinctive feature of Townsville Central State School. Students were described as playing across ages and genders and inviting their peers from all year levels to join in games in the school. Teachers’ comments below highlight this inclusive and supportive environment: *Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Townsville Central State School - Draft Case Study 7.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*“They are all good” Year 2 student.*

The awards offered by Peer Leaders were particularly significant to the younger students. Beyond mere enjoyment, the older students were able to articulate the values and underlying concepts of the lesson, including the recent lesson activity included ‘cleaning’ to promote community service and citizenship. *Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Townsville Central State School - Draft Case Study 8.*

*“We are all a family, we all have to put in some effort - to be involved - cleaning - you can’t just sit around and expect things to happen, you have to all help.”*

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

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

*Big people looking after little people.*

*When you have kids you will know how to treat them*

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

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

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

*You get to learn about different people’s attitudes - learn to empathise with people.*

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

*The Townsville Central community would like to introduce our 2005 school leaders. Our School captains, [ X and Y ] head our Peer Support Leaders who each week work with fellow students to make safe and healthy decisions; cope with their changing environment; and enhance their self esteem, their resilience, their sense of Self and concern for those around them. Congratulations to all of our Year 7 leaders.*

*Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Townsville Central State School - Draft Case Study 9.*

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

Aside from the newspaper advertisements, the school also promoted the Peer Support Program to parents and the wider community through newsletter excerpts and promotional literature. The students invite the Rotary Club to the school annually in appreciation of their support for the program. In 2004 this involved the preparation of a lunch, and in other years a games day has been

organised by the students. The Principal and some of the teachers describe a desire to make community service and awareness an increasing aspect of the program.

## Townsville West State School

*“Peer support is like a key to unlock qualities you never thought you’d have for your life” (Interview: Peer Support Leader).*

### Qualitative data

#### Indications of Support

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

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

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

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

One of the teachers of the older students stated children in her class ‘are really thrilled with the program’. One of the staff from the SEU said of children from the unit, ‘the little ones don’t comprehend much of it, but the bigger ones feel rather important being up there amongst the others’. And the coordinating teacher commented, ‘I walked around on the last activity, and they were all looking happy.’ *Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Townsville West State School - Draft Case Study 11.*

Teachers also commented positively on the program itself, as distinct from the students’ responses to it. One teacher said, simply, ‘It’s fabulous’. Those involved in the SEU indicated they saw it as a valuable and worthwhile program for students in their unit. Another staff member commented ‘the overall benefits far outweigh any other factors’. The benefits this and other staff members referred to included the development of a common language for dealing with social, behavioural and relationship issues, and promoting greater interaction and understanding among students, including students of different ages, backgrounds and abilities.

Students interviewed all said they enjoyed the program:

*It’s really fun because you get to draw pictures and learn lots of new stuff.*

*It’s enjoyable because we get to interact with different age children and get to know children from different classes and don’t have to know just people from our own classes.*

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

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

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

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

#### Salience within the overall school program

The Principal explained the Peer Support Program was an integral but not central part of an overall strategy for Behaviour Management, but where Behaviour Management was seen as connected to, rather than disconnected from, the teaching and learning work constitute the core of the school’s mission. While the Principal was careful not to overstress the significance or functional role of the program in the school, there were several indicators of ways it did spill over into other aspects of the school life. *Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Townsville West State School - Draft Case Study 12.*

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

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

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

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

*of Helen being not just in her office... She sees how it's going. Kids see her being interested and think, 'Well, it must be important. We mean business.'*

Second, the fact the Peer Support Program effectively occupies one whole school afternoon each week while it is in operation. The same teacher commented:

*It's same thing with the briefing. The whole thing is better organised, and it lets everyone know, 'This is important. It matters'.*

*Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Townsville West State School - Draft Case Study 13.*

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

### **Relationships, Behaviour, Leadership and Responsibility**

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

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

*The Peer Leaders handle the SEU kids really well - they're really good, gentle, coaxing... Being in that role working with SEU kids brings them on... it's a wonderful learning experience for them.. I think they're wonderful... Very encouraging.  
Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Townsville West State School - Draft Case Study 14.*

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

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

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

*I play with my Peer Leaders cos they're in a higher age group and they're, like, more mature.*

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

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

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

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

Another commented on their relationship with special needs students:

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

While there appears to me to be a noticeable element of condescension alongside a justifiable pride in what they probably overestimate as their role in promoting good social relations in the school, there is a clear sense here of valuing, and wanting to be part of good supportive relationships with others who are easily rejected as different, or with whom they would not normally mix. *Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Townsville West State School - Draft Case Study 15.*

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

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

Teachers and students contrasted the 2005 group of Peer Leaders favourably with their predecessors, and explained the difference in two ways. First, in terms of the more or less random differences between the two cohorts - this year's class were simply 'a better bunch of kids'. Second, in terms of this year's Peer Leaders having a better understanding of what was involved on the basis of their prior experience. This itself points to a possible effect of the Peer Support Program over the longer term, and suggests a likely cumulative impact of sustaining the program over a number of

years. It seems unlikely the process of appointing leaders has played a critical role in ensuring only 'good kids' become leaders, as it seems largely to be a process of self selection in which virtually all senior students become leaders. The coordinator explained:

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

Overall, teachers agreed the Peer Leaders were doing a good job, and more than one commented on a student who had started badly as a leader, but had improved and 'really gained from the experience'. *Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Townsville West State School - Draft Case Study 16.*

Teachers and Peer Leaders both commented on their changing competence in exercising leadership. At the beginning (referring variously to 2004 and the first weeks of 2005), Leaders were 'wooden' and 'inflexible'. One teacher explained (in relation to 2004):

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

She contrasted to this year when:

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

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

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

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

After debriefing and much critical discussion and exploration of alternative strategies, they have developed a range of approaches with encouragement and incentives. Consequently, one teacher commented:

*Their development as leaders is quite cute... if they finish early they think up their own little games to play. And they talk about it: 'Little Mary, she really needed my help today'.*

*Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Townsville West State School - Draft Case Study 17.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Such taking of responsibility ranged from relatively minor matters of looking through the session outline ahead of time, or carefully preparing their own notes so as to reduce their dependence on the written script to taking on responsibility for helping younger students or students with special needs in the playground, as noted already in discussing relationships in the school. And, according to the coordinating teacher, for the most part, 'they've taken on those responsibilities really well.' *Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Townsville West State School - Draft Case Study 18.*

### **Learning about Self; Personal Growth**

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

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

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

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

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

Another commented:

*When I ask them, 'What did you do today, what did you learn today', some really grasp it, others just parrot back what they've heard before - often the previous week.  
Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Townsville West State School - Draft Case Study 19.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Peer Support is like a key to unlock qualities you never though you'd have or be able to have for your life.*

*Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Townsville West State School - Draft Case Study 20.*

While many of these comments talked about the impact on their own self awareness, there were also indications of a growth in empathetic understanding of *others'* feelings in situations:

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

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

*The benefits are clear - greater self esteem in the classroom.*

In relation to the Peer Leaders, she added,

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

Another commented:

*They've really grown in themselves.*

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

*We've got more self esteem. We've learned things are positive about ourselves. Things are good about ourselves.*

## **Values**

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

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

The Principal, too, noted values were 'very explicit in the sessions we did'.

Staff identified such things as respect, how you show you're a friend, tolerance, fair go, valuing other people, empathy, responsibility and trust as values taught in the program. Students referred to many

of the 'qualities' (Peer Support terminology) are included in the *National Values Framework* - respect, tolerance, caring, looking after ourselves, self esteem, friendship, helping, peacefulness and kindness. *Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Townsville West State School - Draft Case Study 21.*

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

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

Another commented:

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

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

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

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

The naturalness of this multi faceted approach to values education and an indication of how seamlessly the Peer Support Program fits within, and contributes to the impact of the school in teachers' work and children's developing values was illustrated in the following comment made by one teacher:

*I was just chatting to a little child today in trouble. And I thought, 'This is where connectedness comes in'. And talking with him I realised I was using all these terms - being honest, being fair - all the values. And I thought, 'Yes, we use these terms, we talk with them about it'.*

*Values Education for Australian Schooling: VEGPS Stage 1: Townsville West State School - Draft Case Study 22.*

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

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

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