

Developing capability – peer support mentoring

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Personal and social capability is one of the seven general capabilities outlined in the Australian Curriculum. At the core of personal and social capability is the social and emotional learning of students; it focuses on individuals learning to understand themselves and others and, in the process, more effectively manage the many facets of their lives including their relationships, work and learning (ACARA, 2012). Peer mentoring/peer support is an effective way through which students can develop the many facets of this capability.

Research into the effectiveness of Peer Support Programs has highlighted the positive impact these programs can have on the wellbeing of students.

A study conducted by Dr Louise Ellis from the University of Western Sydney in 2003 involved surveying over 2,300 secondary school students enrolled in Years 7, 10 and 11 who were participants in Peer Support Programs. This study found benefits for both the younger students who were being mentored as well as for the older students who had taken on the role of mentor. The Peer Leaders indicated that being a mentor was valuable to their personal growth and development, including an improvement in their leadership skills. For many students, being involved in the program assisted in improving their communication skills. The findings also indicated that peer support programs promoted the development of friendships between older and younger students, changed the perceptions of bullying, enhanced problem solving and decision making skills, and had positive impacts on students' sense of self-confidence and self worth (Ellis, 2005).

Initially, the Peer Mentoring Program at Toorak College involved Year 8 students working with Year 7 students. The main aim was to assist the Year 7s in making a smooth transition from their primary years to their secondary schooling, whilst also providing the Year 8s with opportunities to develop their leadership skills. Organised contact between the two groups occurred on two days, with the expectation that the older students would continue this contact during lunchtimes and through events such as House activities. Whilst this assisted the Year 7s in their transition into the secondary schooling, the age difference between the two groups was not significant enough for the Year 8s to really be viewed as leaders by the girls they were mentoring. Lack of formal opportunities for contact between the two groups was also considered to be an issue.

A review of the Peer Mentoring Program resulted in staff undergoing training provided by Peer Support Australia; this organisation "provides school communities with an evidence-based, peer led approach to enhance the mental, social and emotional wellbeing of young people". This more formal approach to peer support/mentoring requires Year 10 or 11 students to work with small groups of Year 7 students. The program "empowers

young people to support each other and contribute positively to society" (Peer Support Australia, 2012).

At Toorak College, all Year 9 students are involved in a two day training program in preparation for becoming Peer Support Mentors in Year 10. Following the training, students volunteer to become mentors; this is an important consideration as committed and interested volunteers are more likely to deliver a successful program. For the duration of Term One, the Peer Support Mentors work with small groups of Year 7 students on a weekly basis in a timetabled lesson of one hour duration, which occurs during their assigned Personal Development lesson. The mentors

are responsible for planning and implementing activities designed to support the Year 7 students whilst promoting a sense of connectedness to the school community. The effectiveness of the program is dependent on the positive relationships that develop between the older and younger students; the older students act as role models for the younger students and have a positive influence on them.

During the one hour sessions, the Peer Support Mentors work with their group of 8-10 students on activities based around making connections with others, being organised and time management which assist students with managing the increasing demands of secondary schooling. The Year 10 students take ownership

of the lessons and initiate changes where they are needed in order to cater for the individual students they are mentoring. The program enables the mentors to develop skills they can take with them into the wider community. When a Year 10 student sees that she can effectively manage a group of 8 to 10 younger students, it gives her greater confidence about what she can do and achieve in other areas of her life. What students learn about themselves is one of the many benefits of the Peer Support Mentoring Program at Toorak College.



References

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