

Tracing Changes from Ideology to Practice:
Participants' Perceptions of the Peer Support System at the
Primary School Level

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Since the early 1970's, an increasing number of Australian
Primary Schools have chosen to adopt Peer Support Programs as
a part of their curriculum. The Peer Support Program for

primary schools is a curriculum package which aims to promote the "personal and responsible growth of students within their school community", thereby allowing development of the skills necessary to live a safe and productive life in society." (Peer Support Foundation, 1994 p.1). In peer support, volunteer teachers train senior students to become caring leaders of family sized groups of junior students (see Figure 1). Peer support is demonstrated when "persons of equal rank and importance give moral support and encouragement to each other." (Peer Support Foundation, undated p.1). Current usage of the package is widespread, with Peer Support Programs operating in over 600 primary schools in New South Wales at the time of study.

The earliest peer support groups were established in the United States for select groups of children who were experiencing specific difficulties, such as parental separation, or school phobia (e.g., Rosenstein-Manner, 1990; Diamond, 1985). The Australian Peer Support Program, first developed by drug education officer Elizabeth Campbell in 1971, differed fundamentally from these early groups in that it was generalised, aiming to benefit children from all sectors of the school community. In Ms Campbell's peer support program, personal development was implicitly nurtured, primarily through group discussion.

Although Ms Campbell's primary Peer Support Program is still in operation, the Peer Support Foundation is now primarily responsible for implementing and sustaining peer support in New South Wales primary schools. Unlike Ms Campbell's program, which stipulated the absence of goal-oriented striving, the Peer Support Foundation's program is entirely driven by outcomes (e.g., "The child will describe relationship between themselves and family members"; "The child will capably nominate important factors in decision making") (Peer Support Foundation, 1993 pp.5-6). These

CONCEPT: Peer Support

POLICY DOCUMENT

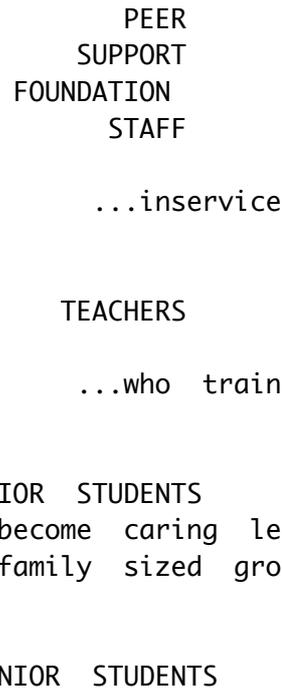


FIGURE 1: Peer Support Program structure.

outcomes correlate directly with those specified in Strands 1, 2, 3 and 4 of the current Primary Education Syllabus for Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (Department of School Education, 1992).

The Rationale for Peer Support: Contemporary educational theory views social interaction as being facilitative of social and academic development. Learning in the view of social cognitive theory, for example, is reliant upon one's operating within a basically social context (e.g., Bandura, 1986). So it is too in the view of Russian educational theorist Vygotsky, who believed that all higher mental functions have social origins and appear, at first, "on an interpersonal plane between individuals, before they exist on an intrapsychic plane within the individual" (Berk, 1991 p.247). Yet in spite of this, to date there has generally been a lack of educational interventions which aim specifically to foster social competence amongst children. Therefore a general social intervention

program such as peer support would seem timely and justified.

Peer Support as an Educational Innovation: Although many of the principles behind peer support are not alien to contemporary educational theory, the program is considered innovative in that it contravenes the age stratification that characterises our current education system by employing mixed-age groupings. Further, peer support is run in the first instance by child participants themselves - not a qualified teacher. These innovative features characterise a variety of peer-mediated learning programs, such as peer tutoring, that have gained favour in the latter half of this century. The majority of these programs differ, however, in that they employ a tutor-tutee ratio of one to one, whereas in peer support, one or two leaders are responsible for a group of up to ten junior participants.

Problems with peer support: Although usage of the Peer Support Program is currently widespread in New South Wales Primary Schools, a lack of research-based studies addressing the area has meant that the extent to which practice reflects ideology is at present largely unknown. Yet, there is sufficient reason to speculate that the statewide conception of peer support may not be entirely unified. Firstly, the primary peer support program in Australia has a complex and multiple-sourced history, much of which has not been documented. Further, program innovators have primarily attempted to implement it in a largely 'top down' manner, which has historically proven to be largely ineffective (e.g., Loucks, Newlove & Hall, 1975). Finally, no formal evaluations of the primary Peer Support Program have been conducted to date. As a result of these factors, it seems probable that some deviation from ideology may be occurring in current practice.

The Present Study: Specifically, the present study investigated perceptions relating to three broad areas which emerged as being topical in the above reviewed literature:

1. What is peer support?
2. How does peer support operate?

3. What are the outcomes of peer support?

It was expected that the school students involved in peer support would have quite different ideas about peer support, its processes and outcomes, than would teachers at the school, and members of the policy making body. Increasing distance from the original conception of the program as one moves down the hierarchy was predicted.

Method

Design: The aim of the present study was to ascertain perceptions of the primary Peer Support Program amongst participants at its various levels of operation, and to identify any discrepancies in viewpoints which may exist between these groups. The method chosen was a case study of the operation of a peer support scheme in one school over the course of one cycle (five forty minute sessions). Interviews and observation were the primary means of data collection.

Research site: The study was based at a Sydney suburban state primary school. Peer support had been operating at the school for three years at the time the study took place. The school's original program document was a compilation of material from three externally prepared sources: The Elizabeth Campbell Peer Support Program (Campbell, 1990), The Peer Support Program Primary School's Manual (Peer Support Foundation, 1991) and Be A Friend: Peer Support for Primary Schools (N.S.W. Department of Education, 1990). Since the inaugural cycle, therefore, the amount of input from the Peer Support Foundation at this particular school has been comparatively low.

The school's now firmly established Peer Support Program has become increasingly school-based since its introduction to the school in 1991. At the time the study was being conducted, junior participants in the program were from Years K to 3, and each group was led by one child from Year 6. Every child in Year 6 was allocated a peer support group. Groups typically contained eight to ten children, and were formed alphabetically.

Participants: The study involved four main groups of participants, representing the four major levels of the Peer Support Program's operation:

- a) Peer Support Foundation staff - A forty minute interview was conducted with a representative staff member from the Peer Support Foundation.
- b) Teachers - Four members of teaching staff at the cooperating school were consulted for 30-40 minute interviews.
- c) Year 6 Leaders - Four Year 6 peer support leaders were consulted for ten minute interviews.
- d) Junior Participants - Eight junior participants in the Peer Support Program (four from Year 3 and four from Year 1) were consulted for ten minute interviews.

Both boys and girls, and a range of social abilities were represented in the child interview sample (teachers were asked to nominate equal numbers of children with good and poor social skills).

Procedure: Four separate interviews - each comprising 23 core questions - were compiled for participants at the four major levels of program operation: Peer Support Foundation, teachers, Year 6 leaders and junior participants. Questions in these interviews were roughly equivalent across the levels, so as to allow for direct comparison of perceptions of the program at each of the four major levels of operation during the final analysis. All interviews were individually conducted at the school. They were recorded (with the interviewee's permission) on audio cassette, and later fully transcribed.

Observation of the Peer Support Program in operation was conducted in order to verify responses offered by teacher and child informants at the school level. The researcher observed 90 minutes of the Year 6 leaders' training course, and all subsequent peer support sessions which took place over the cycle (40 minutes per week for five weeks). Over the five week period, the researcher attempted to observe as many groups as was realistically possible, to obtain a balanced perspective of the program's operation.

Results

Observation: The recent cycle of peer support at the cooperating school consisted of five forty minute sessions. In the week prior to the first session, Year 6 leaders undertook a two half-day training session. The overall time allocated to peer support during this cycle was significantly less than that prescribed by the Peer Support Foundation, who recommend a full two day Year 6 training course and a minimum of fifteen half hour sessions (Peer Support Foundation, 1991).

All of the observed peer support sessions were primarily games-based. Children were observed participating in a range of both cooperative and competitive, indoor and outdoor games over the five week cycle. While broad themes (such as 'Outdoor Games') were each week provided by teachers, the content of each session was decided almost exclusively by the child group members themselves during the respective session.

Supervising teachers varied significantly in the extent to which they intervened with peer group proceedings. Some helped

run the groups, others kept an eye on proceedings while others still left the children to run the sessions themselves. The capabilities of Year 6 leaders also varied. Some ran the sessions with confidence. Others were unable to control the younger children and get them to work on group activities. Both of these factors influenced the extent to which groups functioned cohesively.

Generally, however, group cohesion appeared to improve over the course of the observed peer support cycle, as children became increasingly accustomed to the new structure and to the role expected of them during peer support time. Had the cycle been longer, it seems likely cohesion amongst peer support groups would have strengthened even further, which in turn, would have contributed more substantially to the overall success of the program.

Interviews: Perceptions of the primary Peer Support Program

were elicited by means of focused interviews with participants from its four major levels of operation: Peer Support Foundation, teachers, Year 6 leaders and junior participants. Interview responses for each of the three major focus questions will be considered in turn.

1. What is peer support?: Two qualitatively distinct conceptions of peer support emerged from interview responses. Peer support was perceived to be either:
 - a) An outcomes-based program which aims to teach explicitly personal development through a series of structured, content-driven lessons, or
 - b) A games-based program which aims to foster friendship, school cohesion and enjoyment implicitly through interaction with peers.

According to the representative of the Peer Support Foundation, policy at the Foundation unambiguously supports an outcomes-based approach. Peer support sessions are seen by the Foundation as highly structured, each a specific focus, around which all activities are to be based. In contrast, child informants from Years 1, 3 and 6 alike, invariably described the games-based approach to peer support in their response to questions on the nature of peer support. Indeed "games" and "play" were two terms used most frequently by all of the twelve child informants when providing an account of what happens in peer support sessions.

While teachers at the school were largely aware of this dichotomy, they tended to advocate the games-based approach,

which they claimed was more realistically achievable for child participants in the program. This viewpoint is not accepted by the Peer Support Foundation, who argue that the lack of focused content, structure and direction in the games-based approach is not educationally defensible and therefore undermines the purpose of peer support.

2. How does peer support operate?: Participants were questioned about what they saw as the roles and responsibilities within the Peer Support Program. These perceptions varied considerably amongst participants at the various levels of operation. The nature of responses to this question was largely dependent upon where the informant was situated on the hierarchy. For example, adult informants viewed the supervising teacher in peer support as a facilitator - of rank equal to that of child participants - who intervenes minimally in session proceedings. Children themselves, however, were inclined to perceive supervising teachers as figures of authority in the peer support context, as they did beyond it.

Concern regarding lack of teacher commitment towards the program amongst a minority was expressed by several informants at all levels of its operation. While children enjoyed the child-centred nature of the program, selective teacher intervention also appeared to be necessary to maintaining a harmonious group dynamic, as the Year 6 leaders - still children themselves - did not always possess the skills or maturity to sustain their diverse group for the period required.

Perceptions as to the role of child participants in the program was closely linked to perceptions as to the purpose

of peer support. The Peer Support Foundation, for example, who advocate an outcomes-based approach, see the Year 6 leaders as being responsible for teaching a structured lesson. Juniors were simply responsible for partaking in the corresponding activities. In contrast, school level informants, who advocated a games-based approach, saw leaders as being primarily responsible for managing the various games initiated by their group over the course of each session.

Behaviour and discipline within the group were mentioned increasingly as one moved down the hierarchy. While it was an issue barely worthy of mention to the Peer Support Foundation representative, it was a preoccupation amongst Year 6 leaders and to a lesser extent, junior participants. Leaders saw themselves as being primarily responsible for "keeping the kids under control". One elaborated, "You have to make sure that

[juniors] don't mess around, that they listen to you and you tell them what do do."

In the recent cycle of peer support at the cooperating school, children from Years 4 and 5 had been omitted from the more typically employed K-6 structure, as in previous cycles it had been found that children in this age group had been disrupting the most and deriving the least from the program. A more harmonious group dynamic was unanimously reported by informants at the level of the school since this somewhat experimental measure had been taken.

It seems likely that the school's minimal contact with the Peer Support Foundation is accounting at least partially for the dissimilarities between the two bodies' perceptions of the program. It would also appear, however, that inadequate communication about the program between participants at the school level is contributing to a degree of deviation from intended practice. Interviews revealed that communication with others does not occur to a great extent at the school level, and the communication which did occur tended to be more organisational than substantive. A need for enhanced communication about the program at the level of the school was identified by two of the four teacher informants, both of whom contributed in a supervisory but not an organisational capacity to peer support within the school.

Although teaching staff at the cooperating school do not liaise with the Peer Support Foundation when planning and implementing their Peer Support Program, they do negotiate quite extensively with the child participants. In the recent cycle, particular emphasis was further placed upon leader-junior negotiation. Children typically elect to pursue a games-based rather than an outcomes-based approach to peer support when given the option, as they report deriving more enjoyment from playing games than from participating in content-based activities. While the increased emphasis upon child-centred planning has therefore resulted in greater enjoyment of the program amongst child participants, it has also resulted in even further deviation from the outcomes-based program prescribed by the Peer Support Foundation.

3. What are the outcomes of peer support?: A major stated aim of peer support is to foster the socialisation skills of participating children. Informants varied in their perceptions of the extent to which they felt this outcome was being

achieved. In general, the further one moved up the hierarchy, the more idealistic perceptions became.

The least positive perceptions were provided by the socially less able child informants. Their responses indicated that the inherently social peer support context was, if anything, reinforcing the difficulties they experienced in relating to others. In response to this, during peer support sessions these children were inclined to either disrupt: "I really get on the leader's back and she gets really annoyed about it. It's not like fighting, it's fine to me, but not to her", or withdraw: "You're always left out"; "I'm very sort of quiet [in peer support] because [the juniors] sort of take over".

The Peer Support Foundation is concerned in the first instance with strengthening the self of the child participants. They argue that by exploring the program's content, taking risks and experiencing success in the safe context of their peer support group, each child personally gains the esteem and ultimately the life skills needed for survival in any situation with which they may be confronted. The ultimate aim is to make children self sufficient. School cohesion and harmonious interaction with others, they argue, can only occur when this has been achieved.

In contrast, the school was comparatively unconcerned with using peer support as a means of strengthening the self. Rather, peer support was seen as a device for strengthening the school as a united entity. Teacher informants reported using peer support as a means of building for the child a network of people to whom they could turn - within the school context - should the need arise. Indeed teacher informants seemed somewhat unconvinced about the direct impact peer support had made on the self esteem of individual children. The reported self concept of many child informants in relation to peer support was linked closely to their overall attitude to the program. Those who enjoyed peer support typically felt good about themselves when they were there, while the reverse was true for those who did not.

The main outcome of peer support, in the teacher's eyes, was that children now knew far more children of different ages levels within the school. For the most part, the children interviewed said they had made new friends or knew more children as a result of the scheme.

Discussion

In summary, when perceived and observed outcomes of the program at the various levels of operation were compared, a

dichotomy between the school and the Peer Support Foundation was once again apparent. The Peer Support Foundation saw peer support as a means of long-term, personal intervention. The outcomes were conceived in terms which related primarily to the individual, and extended beyond the immediate school context. In contrast, perceptions of informants at the school level were entirely school-based. Peer support as teachers and children at the cooperating school see it functions to provide children with an extended network within the school, to promote school cohesion, to reinforce the school rules and so

forth.

The Peer Support Foundation's ultimate aim for each child is independence, whereas the school's is to provide a supportive body on whom children can depend. While the child's best interest is obviously at heart in each instance, the two conceptions themselves are actually opposing.

Invariably, the discrepancies found in this study had occurred as a result of communication breakdown between certain bodies and/or individuals at the various levels of program operation. The occurrence is perhaps not surprising, given the hierarchical program structure, which necessitates the 'passing down' of material a minimum three times before the program is actually implemented. The 'Chinese Whispers'-like nature of this structure leaves it most susceptible to deviation from the initially stated ideal. The cooperating school in this study has attempted to counter the problems of top-down implementation by abandoning the model altogether, and replacing the externally devised program with their own entirely school-based innovation. However the lack of input from these external bodies has resulted in a program which on many counts does not resemble peer support as it is construed by the Peer Support Foundation.

An equilibrium between top down and bottom up approaches to curriculum might be achieved with the employment of a curriculum which is truly negotiated between participants at all levels of a program's operation (Boomer, 1992). In peer support, this negotiation would necessarily involve participants from the Peer Support Foundation, teachers, Year 6 leaders and junior participants. Enhanced communication between and amongst participants at each of these levels would serve to minimise the severe discrepancies in perceptions, many of which were entirely unrecognised to participants at other levels at the time of interview. Negotiation would further promote equity amongst participants at every level, a necessary criterion to successful peer support.

Educational Implications

Following this study, a number of recommendations are made about how to achieve a successful Peer Support Program. The following characteristics are thought to be desirable:

*A unified source. Behind every educational resource is a philosophy, and in peer support, the various documents available for consultation are not necessarily philosophically aligned. If a school compiles its own program from more than one source, the result may lack unity and therefore may not achieve its educational aims.

*Careful and deliberate organisation.

The school wishing to adopt the Peer Support Program needs to establish a formalised plan for each cycle of operation, and this needs to be communicated adequately to all participants. When compiling groups, teachers should ensure that the children comprising each group are chosen carefully. This is particularly important with regards to socially less able students, as aggressive-aggressive or withdrawn-withdrawn combinations in a group is not conducive of a harmonious

group dynamic. There is an argument for excluding children from Years 4 and 5 from the primary Peer Support Program.

* Adequate support/supervision from participating teachers. Although peer support is a fundamentally child-centred program, and child participants appreciate being given as much autonomy as they are able to manage, they also need ready access to a qualified teacher who can intervene, should the need arise.

*Commitment. Individual staff must be committed to the concept of peer support if the program is to be successful, as will be demonstrated by proper fulfilment of the supervisory role during peer support time. The school must demonstrate commitment to the program, for example, by allocating a reasonable period of time (a minimum fifteen sessions per cycle) to operation of the program. Where time is pressured within a schools, achievement of this may require integration with other components of the curriculum, (e.g., situating a Buddy Class program within the peer support program).

*Negotiation between participants at all levels of the program's operation. Peers are defined by

the Peer Support Foundation as being those of equal rank and importance - irrespective of age. A part of this equality surely must come from equal input into compilation of the program. Therefore participants at all levels of the Peer Support Program's operation should be consulted extensively before, during and after each cycle, and their respective viewpoints and ideas incorporated.

Although a number of factors which are necessary to successful peer support have been determined, the results obtained in this study have possibly raised more questions than they answer. Agreement on a number of significant points, such as how personal development might best be fostered, is not universal amongst participants at all levels of the program's operation.

The Primary Peer Support Program is at present at the height of its popularity, operating in more primary schools than ever before in its history. That so many schools have chosen to adopt the Peer Support Program in itself conveys the extent to which the principles it embodies are valued, and therefore its potential worth. Yet in spite of this, a number of substantial problems with this by no means unified program are at present threatening to undermine it. If we as educators do indeed consider peer support to be an intervention worth pursuing, then we will undertake the modifications and further research necessary to its long-term continuation.

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