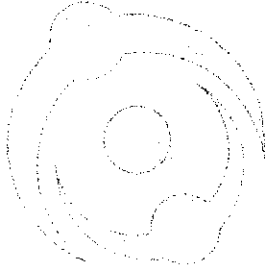


Submission
No 12

INQUIRY INTO BULLYING OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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**Submission to the
Parliament of New South Wales
Inquiry into the bullying of children and young people**

from Peer Support Australia

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Supported by:

Federal Department of Health and Ageing • NSW Health Department • Mental Health and Drug and Alcohol Office
Queensland Government, Mental Health Branch
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***"The Peer Support Program makes a significant contribution to
schools' endeavours to provide positive outcomes for students."***

Dr Louise Ellis BPsych (Hons) PhD (Psych), 2003

Outline

i	Terms of Reference	3
1.	Introduction	4
2.	Links to Terms of Reference	5
3.	The Peer Support Program	16
4.	Research on the Peer Support Program	19
4.1	University of Western Sydney 2003	19
4.2	James Cook University 2006	20
4.3	Pilot study Deakin University 2008	21
4.4	Current study 2007-2009	22
5.	Conclusion	22

**Submission to the
Parliament of New South Wales
Inquiry into the bullying of children and young people
Submission from Peer Support Australia**

Terms of Reference

That General Purpose Standing Committee No 2 inquire into, and report on, best practice approaches to reduce bullying of children and young people, including:

1. The nature, level and impact of bullying among school age children and young people under the age of 18, including apprentices and trainees
2. factors contributing to bullying
3. prevention and early intervention approaches to address bullying, including 'cyber-bullying'
4. co-ordination and co-operation between relevant government agencies to address bullying
5. the evidence-base for effective anti-bullying approaches
6. approaches to address bullying in Australian and overseas jurisdictions
7. any other relevant matter.

"The positive results suggest the Peer Support Program is worthwhile, especially in changing the attitudes to bullying, which is one of the study's significant findings."
Dr Ellis, in evaluating the efficacy of the Peer Support Program, 2003.

1. Introduction

Peer Support Australia is a not for profit, non government organisation. The Peer Support Program is a peer led, universal, intervention and preventative mental health program operating in both primary and secondary schools in Australia for almost 40 years. It is a skills based, experiential program with the emphasis on developing and enhancing skills amongst young people for lifelong learning. The Peer Support Program is integrated into curricula and linked to complementary educational initiatives such as the National Safe Schools Framework, National Framework for Values Education, Anti-bullying, Student Welfare/Pastoral Care and buddy programs.

The Peer Support Program is a valuable learning experience for students and in conjunction with other strategies provides a powerful tool for bringing about positive cultural change in school communities. It currently operates in 1,400 schools in NSW, ACT, Queensland and Tasmania. In 2009 pilot programs will be conducted in Western Australia and the Northern Territory.

The mission of Peer Support Australia is to provide dynamic peer led programs which foster the mental, social and physical wellbeing of young people and their community.

Peer Support Australia has been providing training and resources to support schools in addressing bullying behaviours since 1997. The issue of bullying behaviours is an important focus for schools and society in general. There are reports in the media almost weekly about the effects of bullying behaviours on young people and communities, in particular the recent prevalence of what is known as 'cyberbullying'. The onus is on schools to understand this issue and implement strategies to create safe and supportive social and learning environments.

Peer Support Australia has developed a program for primary and secondary schools to support students, staff and parents to become more aware of bullying behaviours. A whole school approach to creating positive change includes raising awareness, developing strategies and implementing procedures.

Funding provided by the then Department of Science, Education and Training enabled Peer Support Australia to redevelop both their primary and secondary anti-bullying modules in 2006.

Peer Support Australia is affiliated with the National Centre Against Bullying (NCAB). The mission of NCAB is to create schools and other environments that are strong, connected and caring, and to reduce bullying and minimise its harm on young people.

Peer Support Australia has presented a several national conferences in the area of anti-bullying.

The National Safe Schools Framework, implemented in 2005, incorporates existing good practice and provides an agreed national approach to assist schools and their communities address issues of bullying, harassment, violence, child abuse and neglect. A significant number of children and young people suffer mental, social and emotional health problems.

2. Links to Terms of Reference

The following outlines the terms of reference to which the Peer Support Program aligns.

1. the nature, level and impact of bullying among school age children and young people under the age of 18, including apprentices and trainees

The serious long term effects of bullying behaviours such as the higher incidence of youth depression, anxiety and lower self esteem reinforce the need to address the issue effectively within a broad school context.

Further to this the need for developing effective intervention programs is based on statistics from Rigby and Slee (2001) indicating more than 50% of students experience bullying in schools each year. The high prevalence of bullying behaviours in the playground is significant, as approximately 20% of a student's day is spent in the playground.

Bullying rarely occurs in isolation, typically taking place in the presence of other students. It is recognised bullying behaviours are fundamentally about relationship issues (Pepler and Craig, 2000 and 2003; Morrison, 2002; Campbell, 2005). The social nature of bullying behaviours has led to a focus on research of the role of bystanders and the degree of influence which they can exert on the school culture (Cowie, 2005; Cross, 2005; McGrath and Noble, 2005). It is of critical importance students understand the significant role bystanders can play as their decision to become proactive can have a major influence in reducing bullying behaviours within the school and even the wider community.

2. factors contributing to bullying

Bullying behaviours or peer victimisation as an issue for schools emerged during the 1980s and studies by Olweus (1993) detailed its prevalence in both primary and secondary schools. His findings demonstrated the damaging effects of bullying behaviours on the mental and physical

wellbeing of young people and provided the impetus to develop a wide scale intervention project to reduce peer victimisation in Norwegian schools. This project saw a reduction of about 50% in self-reported peer victimisation (Olweus, 1993).

Some researchers have suggested peer victimisation is an outcome of bullying behaviours and others frame the phenomenon more broadly (Kochenderfer and Ladd, 1996). There is evidence to suggest the prevalence of peer victimisation is greater amongst younger students and most bullying is found to occur in school and involves verbal aggression with boys being significantly more likely to be bullied than girls (Delfabbro et al, 2006; Rigby and Slee, 2001; Rigby 1997). Victimisation tends to decrease in successive years of primary schooling and increases when students enter the first year of secondary school (Rigby, 1994). These findings correlate closely to results from Kids Help Line in particular.

There is also a causal link between peer victimisation and low self esteem (Egan and Perry, 1998; Rigby, 1998; Schwartz et al, 1999), high levels of social alienation, poorer psychological functioning and poorer self image (Delfabbro et al 2006; Schwartz et al, 1999; Rigby, 1998) and poor school adjustment (Rigby and Slee, 2001). In addition higher levels of depression, poor general health, social isolation and suicidal thoughts have also been attributed to systematic and prolonged peer victimisation (Rigby, 1998). Interpersonal correlates such as rejection, lack of friends and low friendship quality is also attributed to peer victimisation (Salmivalli, 2001). This further supports the need for a successful intervention program targeted at school aged students.

A meta-analysis conducted by Card (2003 as cited in Salmivalli, 2004) showed a causal link between peer victimisation and internalising behaviours such as school avoidance, low academic achievement and lack of school enjoyment. Other studies have found increased levels of psychosomatic symptoms among victimised students - headaches, stomach cramps, coughs, sore throats (Rigby and Slee, 2001) are present some three years later. This suggests that increased stress levels associated with prolonged victimisation has a direct impact on physical health.

Peers are important in understanding victimisation and bullying. 80-90% of peers report it is unpleasant to watch bullying occurring in their school (Pepler and Craig, 2000) though they are drawn into bullying interactions by arousal and excitement of aggression. Peers have also been observed adopting a range of roles: reinforcers, assistants, defenders or outsiders (Salmivalli, 2007). There is evidence to suggest that bullying and victimisation have negative influences on the group as well as individual students. The phrase 'social theatre' (Salmivalli, 2007; Cross, 2005) has emerged to explain how student roles actually encourage bullying behaviours. Pro-

social controllers demonstrate positive characteristics (eg. positive social skills), intrinsic friendship motivations and positive wellbeing.

Friendships and supportive family relationships are powerful protective factors against the negative influences of peer victimisation. Changes in students' friendships can be related to changes in social adjustment. Victimisation influences a students' view of others and there is evidence of a risk for social maladjustment (Salmivalli, 2004).

Countering peer victimisation requires school intervention programs which combine efforts to reduce peer harassment and promote positive relationships (Troop-Gordon, 2005) while developing a supportive and inclusive school community (Healy, 2001). A whole school approach is considered to be the most effective means of decreasing bullying behaviours (Salmivalli, 2001; Rigby and Thomas 2003) which includes awareness raising, clear policies, supervision and a targeted program (Smith and Sharp, 1994; Campbell, 2005; McGrath and Noble, 2005). In classes where the student being victimised is supported by other students or where bullying behaviours are generally disapproved of, the negative influences of victimisation may be minimised (Salmivalli, 2004). Effective preventative measures practised by schools include the following elements:

- content in curriculum to develop pro-social attitudes and skills;
- modelling and rewarding positive behaviour;
- promoting activities that engage students;
- reducing opportunities for engaging in bullying behaviours;
- taking steps to resolve conflict before it escalates into bullying; and
- partnerships with parents (Rigby and Thomas, 2003).

Bullying behaviours are learned behaviours and the family environment can contribute to the development of these behaviours. Contributing factors include attitudes held by parents, modelling of inappropriate behaviour, how families resolve conflict and the interaction of all family members in general with good communication at home helping students develop a more positive sense of self, as well as effective coping and social skills (Noller and Callan, 1991).

School culture also has a significant impact on bullying behaviours. Bullying behaviours can be entrenched in the culture of a school and the way in which teachers respond to bullying behaviours is imperative in dealing effectively with the issue. In some instances, the level of bullying behaviours perceived to occur in the school can impact upon its reputation. Schools need to continually build positive relationships with and among students and to give the issue

- | |
|--|
| <p>3. prevention and early intervention approaches to address bullying, including 'cyber-bullying'</p> |
|--|

The first step in dealing with the complex issue of bullying behaviours is to acknowledge it occurs by raising awareness. Peer Support Australia encourages schools to consider the following elements to assist in understanding bullying behaviours and create an environment of change management:

- common understandings;
- parents;
- beliefs and attitudes;
- bullying triangle;
- power of language;
- gathering information; and
- modelling.

Schools need to develop strategies to achieve shared understandings, informed planning and collaborative action among all groups within the school community to develop effective anti-bullying strategies.

Peer Support Australia advocates a whole school approach to create an environment for change to deal with bullying behaviours. Investigating the key elements form part of the comprehensive training and professional development undertaken by teachers. Schools are guided with this framework.

The enhancement of a safe and supportive school environment is a broad concept and its effective implementation will involve a range of integrated and collaborative strategies. A whole school approach ensures students learn appropriate behaviours and skills through the formal and informal curriculum, classroom practices and Peer Support groups. These are further supported by an individual schools' anti-bullying policy, procedures for reporting and current practices within their student welfare or pastoral care policies. Organisational and leadership practices in schools can sustain and strengthen management practices, the level of supervision and enhance prevention strategies.

4. co-ordination and co-operation between relevant government agencies to address bullying

- The Peer Support Program is one of the interventions articulated in the KidsMatter Program Guide which outlines a range of mental health programs available for use in Australian schools.

- Peer Support Australia has been successful in receiving long term funding from DOHA for the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy. This is in recognition that the Peer Support Program increases resilience and connectedness of young people. One of the goals stated in the framework is to:
 - enhance resilience and resourcefulness, respect, interconnectedness and mental health in young people, families and communities, and reduce the prevalence of risk factors for suicide.
- The NSSF incorporates existing good practice and provides an agreed national approach to assist school communities address the issue of bullying behaviours.
"The school develops programs and strategies to empower students to participate in a positive school culture, eg peer support systems." National Safe Schools Framework, 2004.
- Peer Support Australia has formed a partnership with The Alannah and Madeline Foundation (AMF) in recent years. NCAB is an initiative of AMF and brings together a group of individuals from key organisations to draw national attention to the issue of bullying and to bring about a social change in our community.
- The Peer Support Program supports the National Framework for Values Education for Australian Schools which states schools provide "values education in a planned and systematic way." Values education is essential is fostering relationships, personal achievement and improved student wellbeing across the school community.

The Peer Support Program links to the COAG National Plan for Mental Health 2006-2011:

- mental health promotion - aims to protect, support and sustain the emotional and social wellbeing from the earliest years through adult life;
- knowledge about risk and protective factors for mental health contribute to emotional resilience;
- opportunities to improving mental health knowledge and skills are suitable for education; and
- protective factors give people resilience in the face of adversity.

5. the evidence-base for effective anti-bullying approaches

A longitudinal study by the University of Western Sydney Australia, was published in 2003. The research was conducted to determine the efficacy of Peer Support Australia's secondary schools Peer Support Program and proved it gains positive long term benefits for students and school communities. Funded by the Australian Research Council and involving 2,300 secondary students across New South Wales, Australia during 2001-2002, some of the findings demonstrated the Peer Support Program:

- assists students to successfully negotiate transition from primary to secondary school;
- improves relationships with others - peers and teachers; and
- successfully changes attitudes toward bullying behaviours.

In 2005, James Cook University, Australia, conducted case studies as part of the Values Education Good Practice in Schools (VEGPS) Project, Stage 1 to determine the efficacy of the Peer Support Program in primary schools. These studies involved seven schools in Townsville, Queensland, Australia and the findings were published in *The Double Helix of Values Education and Quality Teaching*, (Lovat and Toomey, 2007). Significant findings included:

- developing social relations and interactions;
- contributing positively to whole school activities; and
- demonstrating understandings of abstract concepts.

These results are relevant to educational practitioners and highlight significant benefits schools may achieve in the implementation of an effective Peer Support Program. The Peer Support Program can also be specifically used as a means of countering aggressive behaviour, decelerating anger arousal and reducing bullying behaviours in secondary schools. There is evidence to suggest the Peer Support Program is effective in decreasing the negative effects of bullying behaviours (Ellis, 2003). As the Peer Support Program is a universal intervention program, early intervention is paramount in decreasing the negative effects of bullying behaviours (Morrison, 2002).

Research suggests students who experience bullying behaviours are more likely to speak to their friends about it, making a peer led approach to addressing the issue more appropriate (Cowie, 2005; Cross, 2005; Campbell, 2005). In evaluating the efficacy of the Peer Support Program in 2003, Ellis wrote "The positive results suggest the program is worthwhile, especially in changing the attitudes to bullying, which is one of the study's significant findings."

Many students subjected to regular bullying behaviours are unfairly labelled as 'victims'. Generally these students lack the social skills necessary to prevent such behaviours from occurring and may need to become more assertive in seeking to have their needs met (Smith, Pepler and Rigby, 2004).

People engage in bullying behaviours for a number of different reasons; anger, loneliness, boredom, attention or just to have fun. Typically, children engage in such behaviours because they have little empathy for those they are bullying (Campbell, 2005; McGrath and Noble, 2005). It is important students are taught to become more empathic as well as developing strategies to support them in responding differently to a particular situation.

“There has been increasing emphasis upon the social roles that bystanders of school bullying commonly adoptWhen a bystander actually does object, it has been reported that on 57% of occasions the bullying actually stops” (Rigby and Johnson, 2004).

The only way change can be brought about is through the systematic teaching of skills and strategies to help students when they encounter a bullying situation. Students need to be taught how to recognise bullying behaviours when they occur and how to deal appropriately with such incidents. This may include direct intervention, reporting or a combination of both. They need to be supported in their endeavours to bring bullying behaviours into the open so they can be addressed in a positive manner (Rigby 1996; Pepler and Craig, 2000; Campbell, 2005).

There is evidence to support the notion that intervention programs can be successful in reducing bullying behaviours in schools (Rigby, 2002; Morrison, 2002; Smith, Pepler and Rigby, 2004; Cowie, 2005; Campbell, 2005). Intervention programs which are implemented with younger primary school aged students are likely to have the greatest success. These interventions should also include a whole school approach to raising awareness amongst staff and parents, the revision of existing policies and procedures and social skills development for students. Smith, Pepler and Rigby's review (2004) on successful interventions indicate how well students relate to each other as being key to reducing bullying behaviours. Cowie (2005) posits there is strong evidence 'peer support' is an effective method for assisting students who are bystanders to improve peer relations. She also suggests whilst 'peer support' does not always reduce the frequency of bullying behaviours, it can be an effective preventative measure. From the studies of Cowie we see that 'peer support' is now accepted and valued for its contribution to empowering young people who are bystanders in any bullying incident and provides a program for effecting positive cultural change in school contexts.

Based on evidence co operative learning as a teaching method reduces bullying behaviours (Salmivalli, 2001), the anti-bullying modules, take a multi-faceted approach. Activities are constructed allowing students to set and solve problems by integrating learning, and learning through action. Meaningful learning occurs when students are able to relate new knowledge and skills to their existing frameworks.

Experiential learning as a methodology is incorporated into the anti-bullying learning activities. Experiential learning relies on a holistic, integrated perspective combining experience, perception, cognition and action. It needs to be socially and culturally constructed. The anti-bullying modules provide this context. The Peer Support Program works best within a school culture that already teaches, models and supports positive and collaborative relationships between all groups embracing co operative problem solving. The anti-bullying modules empower students to recognise, challenge and support each other. Students feel safer and more confident when they experience positive relationships with a high degree of openness and trust.

Pressure to rapidly solve bullying behaviours can lead school communities to react to incidents or seek out externally produced, one-off programs. These 'quick fix' solutions do little to address the broader social and historical perspectives as to why students engage in bullying behaviours. A positive school culture is one that responds to bullying behaviours by changing attitudes and beliefs and building upon existing strategies. These strategies are designed to further develop and enhance a positive school culture supporting responsible personal behaviour and effective teaching and learning.

6. approaches to address bullying in Australian and overseas jurisdictions

Further recent studies highlight the impact of bullying behaviours on school aged children and young people. The findings from a range of key recent studies are summarised below.

Australian National Social and Emotional Wellbeing Survey (2007).

Michael Bernard, University of Melbourne, surveyed 11,526 students and 6,860 teachers from 2003-07.

- Bullying behaviours were displayed at all levels of social and emotional wellbeing.
- Greater percentage of bullying behaviours occurs at the lower levels of social and emotional wellbeing.
- 57% of students who bully display positive self-esteem.
- 59% of students who bully display under achievement.
- 59% of students who bully do not relate well to classmates who are different.

Mission Australia National Youth Survey (2007).

- 29,000 young people surveyed aged between 11-24 years.

- 22.7% of respondents ranked bullying/emotional abuse as the seventh most frequent issue of concern.
- This represents a decrease since 2004 (36.3%), however physical/sexual abuse, coping with stress, school or study problems and discrimination are all separate categories so the real figure may be significantly higher. Family conflict ranked number two.
- The internet is considered by young people as an increasingly important source of information for dealing with bullying behaviours. However, friends are the main source of advice for 86% of respondents.

Michael Carr-Gregg (2007).

In conjunction with *Girlfriend Magazine*, an online survey of 588 13-18 year olds revealed the following:

- 75% know someone who has been bullied online;
- 27% admitted to having bullied someone online;
- 58% do not know where to report online bullying;
- 49% freely give out their mobile phone numbers at school;
- 24% have been bullied on their mobile phone;
- 85% who have been bullied on their mobile phone know the person; and
- 87% of cyberbullies do so via SMS messaging.

Christina Salmivalli, (2007). University of Turku, Finland.

KiVa is a National Anti-bullying program funded by the Finnish Government. Program results revealed interesting facts regarding the role of bystanders. A summary follows:

- 2 categories - reinforcers (audience) and assistants (join in);
- 20% are reinforcers;
- 8% are 'bullies';
- 12% are 'victims';
- 7% are assistants;
- 17% are defenders; and
- 24% are outsiders.

In addition, findings indicated successful anti-bullying programs should be universal in nature, that is, all students participate in the program.

Donna Cross, (2007). Edith Cowan University, Western Australia

- Australian Bureau of Statistics indicates 1.9 million Australian children are aged between 8-14 years.
- 50% of these are bullied at least once a term.
- 25% are bullied using technology.

- 10% will spend tomorrow afraid.
- 30% will tell no-one.
- 50% will be bullied during recess and lunchtime.

Kids Help Line - Australia (2006).

The national Kids Help Line received more than 3,014 calls from young people about bullying in 2006 making it the sixth most common reason students younger than fifteen years old call the service. 39% of students who reported being bullied to the Kids Help Line experienced ongoing harassment. There has been a slight decrease in the number of young people calling about bullying since 2003. 39% reported episodic incidents. Calls relating to mental health issues increased from 4.6% to 6%.

Debra Pepler and Wendy Craig (2000). York University, Canada

- Bullying and victimisation do not occur in isolation.
- We need to extend our focus beyond the bully and victim to include peers, teachers and parents.
- 11% of students reported regularly intervening in bullying.
- Peers intervened in 11% of playground incidents.
- 80-90% of peers report it is unpleasant to watch bullying.
- Peers are drawn into bullying interactions by arousal and excitement of aggression.
- 42% of bullies and 46% of victims report they have talked to teachers.
- 71% of teachers and 25% of students say teachers almost always intervene.
- Teachers intervene in 14% of classroom incidents and only 4% of playground incidents.

A Victorian Health Department report (2001), states 30% of depression in young people could be prevented if we could stop bullying. Vital to this is the fact only 21% of bullying incidents that occur are reported to a teacher or other adult.

Systematic studies of bullying behaviours are a relatively recent development. Olweus conducted one of the first studies into programs in Norway, aimed at reducing bullying behaviours in the 1970's. He found a 50% reduction occurred in bullying behaviours within schools that had a well planned intervention approach and the social climate of the schools improved (Olweus, 1993). The first empirical studies conducted in Australia by Rigby and Slee in the early 1990's had similar results. It is from these research findings that Peer Support Australia bases its anti-bullying programs and underpinning concepts (Rigby and Slee, 2001).

Further research from Rigby (2002) indicates bullying behaviours can be reduced if schools put in place well planned interventions. These intervention programs are more likely to have greater

success when implemented with younger students (Pepler and Craig, 2000; Smith, Pepler and Rigby, 2004; Campbell, 2005).

The degree of teacher commitment and support to Peer Support Australia's anti-bullying program and a strong community involvement in its implementation are important factors for success. The commitment required for schools to implement the anti-bullying modules is an important and crucial factor in reducing bullying behaviours in schools. The establishment of procedures for parents to influence and be informed of school processes is also vital (Pepler and Craig, 2000 and 2003; Smith, Pepler and Rigby, 2004, Morrison, forthcoming).

Effective intervention programs require teachers, students and parents to work together in reducing bullying behaviours. Schools that encourage a sense of belonging and the involvement of all groups, particularly teachers and students will reduce bullying behaviours (Pepler and Craig, 2000 and 2003; Campbell, 2005).

The serious long term effects of bullying behaviours, such as the higher prevalence of youth depression, anxiety and lower self esteem, reinforce the need to address the issue effectively within a broad school context. The increased rate of poor mental health among young people has contributed to a wealth of programs designed to address a range of issues, particularly bullying behaviours. Bullying behaviours have been recognised as issues for workplaces, in relationships as well as in school communities. Society can no longer perpetuate the myth young people grow out of such behaviours. They need to be given the opportunity to be presented with a range of possible strategies from which they may choose an appropriate one for a particular situation (Rigby, 1997; Galen and Underwood, 1997; Archana, 2000; Hess et al, 2000; Rigby and Slee, 2001).

Sawyer (cited in National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing 2000) indicates 14% of 4-17 year olds suffer from mental health problems. He also found rates of depression increased when relationships were poor, young people were less connected and young people were less involved. The British Medical Journal (1999) published findings from an Australian study which demonstrated students who were bullied tended to be unhappy at school. However, these students enjoyed school but felt isolated and unsupported. This study also found students who bullied and were bullied had the greatest number of psychological and psychosomatic symptoms.

The anti-bullying modules recognise all members of the school community can play a role in reducing bullying behaviours. Students are provided with opportunities to identify bullying behaviours, recognise the three groups present in any bullying scenario, empathise with others, report incidents they are aware of and develop strategies to empower them in future encounters.

7. any other relevant matter

Peer Support Australia has identified a range of protective factors help students maintain mental, physical and social wellbeing and resist bullying behaviours. Some protective factors are social such as interpersonal relationships, family cohesion, social support and a sense of community. Some are life skills such as empathy, resilience, assertiveness, coping, decision making, problem solving, monitoring stress and conflict resolution.

Failure to build protective factors within students has significant long term consequences including difficulty in forming close relationships based on trust and negatively influencing student's perception of the wider community.

The Peer Support Program:

- enhances wellbeing and resilience;
- develops coping skills;
- develops a sense of self efficacy;
- connects older students with younger students;
- develops responsibility and ownership; and
- engages students in fun activities.

3. The Peer Support Program

Peer Support Australia has been supported by the NSW Health Department, Mental Health and Drug and Alcohol Office, for a number of years in recognition of the significant positive benefits on the mental health of children and young people. Recently Peer Support Australia has been successful in securing funding and developing partnerships with Federal Department of Health and Ageing (DOHA); Mental Health and Drug and Alcohol Office, Queensland Government, Mental Health Branch and Federal Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR).

The Peer Support Program is:

- a promotion and prevention program;
- peer led;
- schools-based;
- a universal early intervention program;

- targeted to children and young people;
- skills based and experiential; and
- linked to curriculum areas and other complimentary educational initiatives across a number of states.

In addition, the Peer Support Program is aligned with national frameworks including the National Safe Schools Framework (NSSF), National Framework for Values Education, MindMatters, KidsMatter and the National Centre Against Bullying (NCAB).

Peer Support Australia provides an integrated program of training and learning materials for both primary and secondary schools, which can support schools in achieving positive cultural changes successfully. Peer Support modules have been designed to be used in conjunction with teacher and student leadership training.

In primary schools, peer groups are facilitated by two Year 6 students with small multi age groups from Kindergarten-Year 5. In secondary schools, the traditional approach is Year 10 facilitating small groups for Year 7 to support them through their transition phase to secondary school. Both primary and secondary students are trained as Peer leaders through a 2 day leadership training program. Peer leaders work with students for approximately 30 minutes per week for 8 sessions using Peer Support Australia modules.

Students are supported at every stage through briefing and debriefing sessions conducted by teachers. Briefing and debriefing are vital to the success of the Peer Support Program. Some modules have Teacher Debriefing Notes to be used in class. Newsletter items and Parent Information Leaflets have been included in modules to encourage schools to involve parents in the Peer Support experience by providing ongoing information.

Student learning materials, known as modules, are underpinned by current pedagogy, have a cross curricula focus and are consistent with key educational policies and perspectives. Curriculum areas provide opportunities for students to develop and demonstrate a range of skills. The Peer Support Program enhances this skill acquisition. In addition, the program:

- assists students to develop protective factors;
- empowers students to become more socially connected; and
- encourages lifelong learning.

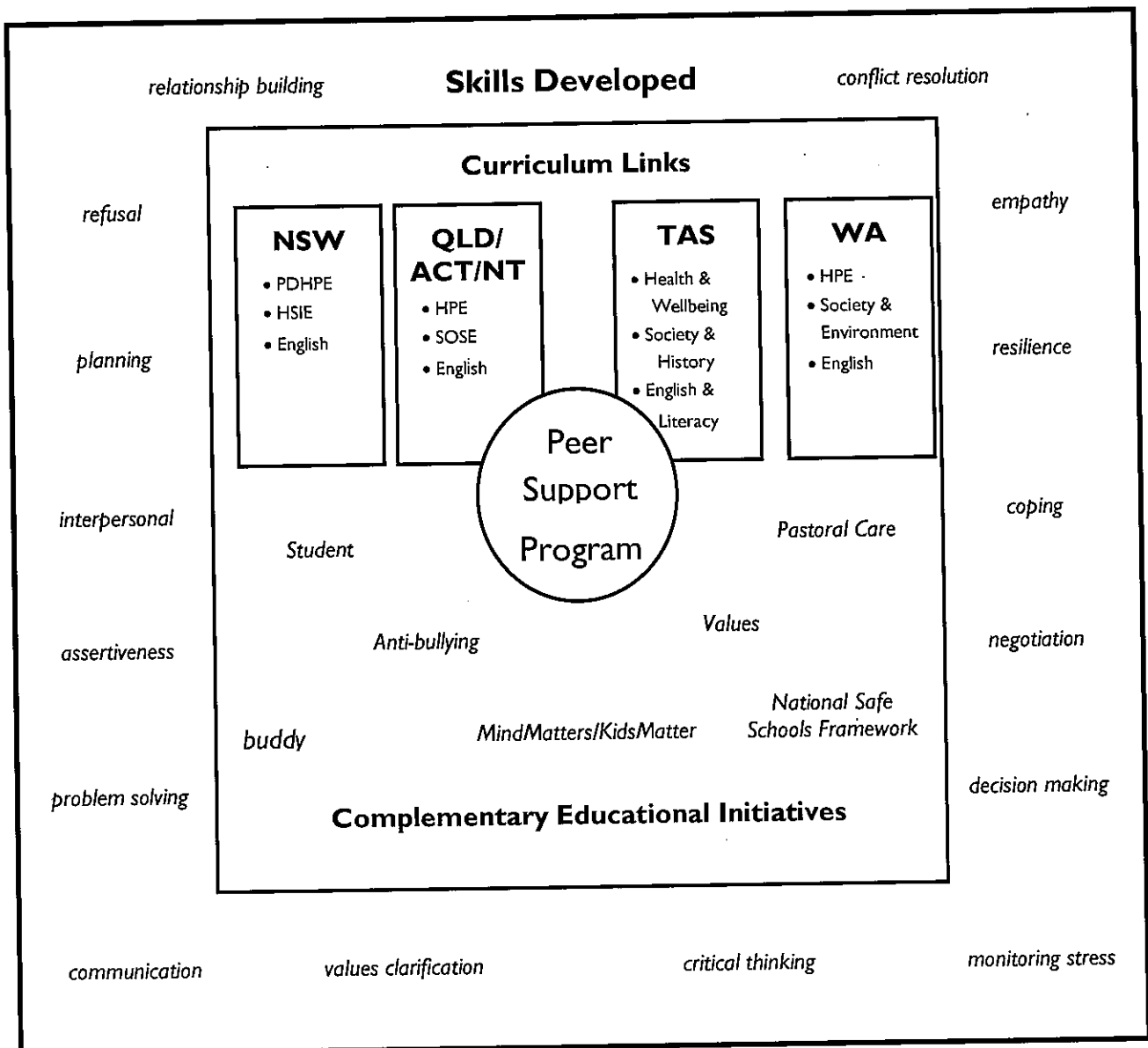
Modules cover a range of focus areas such as:

- transition;
- relationships;
- optimism;

- resilience;
- values; and
- anti-bullying.
-

Sessions within all modules include opportunities to develop positive relationships with others; engage learners; develop skills, understandings and attitudes; work cooperatively and collaboratively; and reflect on their experiences. All of these enhance a young person's mental health over time.

The following highlights the integrated whole school approach to the Peer Support Program.



Many forms of peer support have been implemented in Australian schools and have been given a range of titles such as peer education, peer tutoring, peer mentoring, buddy programs, peer mediation, peer counselling, peer support, and peer support groups.

The outcomes of an effective Peer Support Program include:

- building positive relationships;
- developing skills;
- enhancing mental health;
- taking personal responsibility;
- embracing lifelong learning;
- developing key concepts; and
- encouraging participation.

Key concepts, determined by research and which are evidence based, form the basis of the Peer Support Program and all training programs and student learning materials. Peer Support Australia believes the development of these key concepts will contribute to students' physical, social and mental wellbeing. The key concepts are:

- sense of Self;
- resilience;
- connectedness; and
- sense of possibility.

4. Research on the Peer Support Program

4.1 University of Western Sydney 2003

A longitudinal study by the University of Western Sydney, Self Concept Enhancement and Learning Facilitation (SELF) Research Centre was published in 2003. The research was conducted to determine the efficacy of the secondary schools Peer Support Program and the development of the key concepts espoused by Peer Support Australia. This research proved the Peer Support Program gains positive long term benefits for students and school communities.

Funded by the Australian Research Council and involving 2,300 secondary students across NSW during 2001-2002, some of the findings demonstrated the Peer Support Program:

- assists students to successfully negotiate transition from primary to secondary school;
- improves relationships with others - peers and teachers; and
- successfully changes attitudes toward bullying behaviours.

These results are relevant to educational practitioners and highlight the Peer Support Program can be specifically used as a means of countering aggressive behaviour, decelerating anger

arousal and reducing bullying in schools. There is evidence to suggest the Peer Support Program is effective in decreasing the negative effects of bullying behaviours.

The Peer Support Program is a universal intervention program and early intervention is paramount in decreasing the negative effects of bullying behaviours as one example of mental health concerns amongst young people. Effective intervention programs require whole school communities to work together to encourage a sense of belonging and the involvement of all members of the community.

Research suggests students who experience bullying behaviours are more likely to speak to their friends about it, making a peer led approach to addressing the issue more appropriate. In evaluating the efficacy of the Peer Support Program in 2003, Dr Louise Ellis wrote "The positive results suggest the program is worthwhile, especially in changing the attitudes to bullying, which is one of the study's significant findings."

The implementation of the Peer Support Program has the potential to make a significant contribution in addressing students' mental health problems.

- 1) previous research indicates adolescents' willingness to both provide and receive support from their peers; and
- 2) evidence to suggest young people prefer their friends rather than adults as a source of support and assistance.

Given these findings, traditional mental health programs may not succeed in providing effective intervention. Schools remiss in capitalising on the help seeking patterns of young people may be forfeiting valuable opportunities to address students' wellbeing.

4.2 James Cook University 2006

Case study vignettes, conducted by James Cook University, were published in 2006. This study comprised the Teachers And Educators Around Castle Hill (TEACH) cluster of 7 primary schools in the Values Education Good Practice Schools (VEGPS Stage 1) project in Townsville. Interviews were conducted with teachers and students and findings have been reported in *Values Education and Quality Teaching, The Double Helix Effect*, Professor Terry Lovat and Ron Toomey, 2007

The VEGPS project for TEACH cluster focused on the implementation of the Peer Support Program and to evaluate the impact of the Peer Support Program in each of the 7 schools.

Significant findings included:

- constructing a common language for discussing and shaping values;

- developing social relations and interactions;
- contributing positively to whole school activities;
- demonstrating understandings of abstract concepts; and
- applying understandings to concrete instances.

Lovat, 2007, pg 89 discusses immersing the “whole person in a depth of cognition, social and emotional maturity, and self knowledge” is required. Evidence from these case studies clearly demonstrates an holistic approach to the implementation of values education is apparent through the Peer Support Program.

4.3 Pilot study in conjunction with Deakin University 2008

This pilot study examined the efficacy of Peer Support Australia’s anti-bullying module for primary schools’. A quantitative questionnaire was used to survey 77 students from two primary schools (mean age 10.1 years) in the greater Sydney, Australia area. One school implemented the anti-bullying intervention module, *Speaking Up*, (intervention school) the other school did not (non-intervention school). Students completed a survey containing questions relating to bullying behaviours in their school. This questionnaire was developed from Peer Relations Assessment Questionnaire Students (PRAQ) devised by Rigby and Slee (1993).

This study has provided further evidence to suggest intervention programs are effective in reducing bullying behaviours. It has quantified the assumptions made regarding the efficacy of *Speaking Up* as a module which reduces bullying behaviours which was the principal purpose of this study.

The current study into the anti-bullying intervention module, *Speaking Up*, provided further evidence for the following:

- students developed friendships across the year groups;
- students were more inclusive of others;
- students developed the skills to support target students; and
- students developed the skills to report bullying behaviours.

The anti-bullying intervention module, *Speaking Up*, was shown to:

- reduce the incidence of bullying behaviours;
- change attitudes towards bullying behaviours in the culture of the school;
- provide greater awareness of the different types of bullying behaviours;
- provide support for the longer term benefits of the intervention program.

Peer Support Australia's primary schools anti-bullying module, *Speaking Up*, is an effective intervention strategy supporting students to develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary to make a positive contribution to the creation and maintenance of a safe school environment by reducing bullying behaviours. The findings of the current study make a contribution to research already undertaken in this area.

4.4 Current study 2007-2009

Recently secured long term funding from DOHA, as part of the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy, is a further recognition of the Peer Support Program's positive impact on the mental health of young people. The DOHA funding has provided the opportunities to promote and expand the Peer Support Program in Queensland and Tasmanian schools. In 2009, pilot programs will be conducted in Western Australia and Northern Territory, this is also under the National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy funded by DOHA.

Over the next year an extensive evaluation strategy will be undertaken to further provide evidence of the outcomes of the Peer Support Program and its efficacy as a prevention program.

5. Conclusion

Peer Support Australia's work with school communities over the almost 40 years aims to provide a positive and safe learning environment for students and staff. Taking a whole school approach allows staff to support their students to become young people who can:

- take responsibility for their own wellbeing;
- deal positively, proactively and resiliently with their life experiences; and
- be actively involved in, and supported by, their community.

The Peer Support Program's strength is in being a peer led, skills based, experiential learning program which is integrated into curricula and sustained through all year groups. The Peer Support Program:

- provides students with a supportive learning environment in which to develop the skills, understandings, attitudes and strategies to make healthy life decisions;
- enhances peer connections throughout the school;
- develops and maintains positive relationships within the school community;
- develops skills in resilience, assertiveness, decision making, problem solving and leadership; and
- is endorsed by all education sectors.