

Brief Report: The Learning Partnerships Teacher Education Program 2012

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Learning Partnerships workshop with Thornbury High School students and teacher candidates at the University of Melbourne

BACKGROUND

Five Learning Partnerships workshops were run with Master of Teaching students and students in years seven, nine and ten from four Melbourne secondary schools.

The Learning Partnerships project was initiated by Associate Professor Helen Cahill, Deputy-director of the Youth Research Centre, and has been successfully used in since 2003. In the Learning Partnerships project, teacher candidates participate in a curriculum of shared workshops with classes of school students. The education students use simulated role-play scenarios with the school students, and in this address communication challenges akin to those they will encounter in workplace settings. They practice their skills in conducting wellbeing conversations with young people and receive feedback from the adolescent actors who participate in numerous role play scenarios.

PREPARATION

School teachers and tertiary educators attended a training workshop run by Helen Cahill on the 2nd of August, 2012. Teachers were equipped with lesson plans and activities designed to prepare them for the workshop with teacher candidates. Role play and skills in giving formative feedback were the particular focus of school students' preparation. Over a number of preparatory sessions school students developed and rehearsed various role play scenarios, practiced formative feedback techniques, and discussed help-seeking strategies.



Students and teacher candidates 'breaking the ice'

WORKSHOP

Five Learning Partnerships workshops were run with Master of Teaching students taking the elective Promoting Student Wellbeing. The workshops took place on the 12th of September 2012, at which time the five two-hour workshops ran concurrently.

These workshops involved the participation of:

- 150 teacher candidates
- 125 secondary school students (from years seven, nine and ten)
- Five tertiary educators from the Promoting Student Wellbeing elective (Helen Cahill, Liz Freeman, Chris Daicos, Vivienne Archdall and Ruth Forster)
- Six secondary school teachers from four schools (Princes Hill SC, University HS, Eltham College, Thornbury Darebin SC)

The Learning Partnerships sessions bring classes of school students to workshop with the teacher candidates. Students and teachers work together in participatory activities, small group discussion tasks and role exercises in order to discuss relevant issues. Workshop activities are designed to enhance the capacity of teachers to communicate effectively with adolescents about social and emotional issues which impact on learning and wellbeing. School students are positioned as coaches and key informants. Topics covered include identifying qualities of good teachers, a focus on help-seeking, effective pedagogies for student engagement, and the role of the teacher in supporting students around social and emotional problems.

Each workshop was co-facilitated by a school teacher and a tertiary educator from the Promoting Student Wellbeing course. Four of the school teachers were graduates of the Melbourne Graduate School of Education (three from the Masters of Teaching course, another from before the conversion of this course).



School students giving advice to teacher candidates

RESEARCH

The workshops have been the subject of a Melbourne University study (funded by the CASS foundation). Dr Julia Coffey, Youth Research Centre, has conducted interviews with school students from five schools and teacher candidates before and after the workshops. Education tutors and teachers were also interviewed after the workshops. This data has shown that the workshops provide extremely positive learning outcomes for both teacher candidates and school students.

In interviews prior to the workshops, school students expressed a high degree of reservation about whether they could or should seek help from their teachers about wellbeing issues. Privacy and trust were issues of central concern.

'It just wouldn't happen [talking to a teacher]! [laughing] Because they don't have anything stopping them telling other people, or your parents; or other teacher or people at the school...' (Student 2, year 9, male)

'I reckon it's pretty much just a level of trust. And how you feel comfortable talking to the person. If you've known one of the teachers for awhile you'll trust them and go to them, because they'd be like a family friend, not just a teacher.' (Student 9, year 10, female)

The school students said that participating in the workshop was a 'great experience', and that speaking to students training to be teachers shifted their perspective. School students found that the experience of workshopping with the teacher candidates increased their confidence in

the possibility of relating with teachers and broadened their understanding of the teacher's point of view.

'[Our peers] got a bit more knowledge about the teachers' perspective, and the teachers got the students' perspective.' (Student 6, year 7, female)

'It was good to see how they reacted to things we told them at the start.' (Student 9, year 7, female)

'We got more confidence, talking to teachers' (Student 5, year 7, female)

'It's really worthwhile. Anyone else who gets the opportunity, do it!!'
(Student 8, year 10, male)

Some school students also said that the exercises in the workshop made them feel differently about talking to a teacher about personal problems:

'I think a lot of people feel that if they're having trouble at home they don't want to talk about it because it's embarrassing, that no one really cares about it and they're feeling really down about it... but in the role play, we saw the teacher trying to decide whether to talk to this student or not. And it was nice to know that he was thinking about helping us in that way, he really did care. And that could make a person think 'oh maybe if I do talk to this teacher, something good could happen'.
(Student 12, year 9, female)



School students and teacher candidates discussing the importance of trust

In pre-workshop interviews, teacher candidates entering the elective expressed a lack of confidence about their communication skills, particularly in relation to discussing wellbeing issues with young people:

'What if I say the wrong thing and make it [the problem] worse?' (Teacher candidate 11, m)

'I don't want to approach them out of the blue – do I wait for a signal instead of randomly initiating a conversation with them?' (Teacher candidate 21, f)

Follow-up interviews with the teacher candidates showed that they thought the Learning Partnerships workshop should be provided for all teacher candidates and that it was very useful in assisting them to develop their communication skills.

'I do feel a lot more confident now... We learn a lot in theory about how we should talk to young people, but it was really nice to practically experience that.' (Teacher candidate 12, female)

'It was great to have the actual kid to talk to, not just us pretending to be students! To have a direct source.' (Teacher candidate 7, female)

'The points of general discussion were really very good. The students we had were so insightful. Like we'd do an activity and then open it up for discussion, and I just think some of the insights from them were quite astounding.' (Teacher candidate 8, male)

'I've heard people saying 'I wish all of our classes could be like this.'" (Teacher candidate 10, female)

'I can't understand why it's not run across the whole education course!' (Teacher candidate 11, male)



Students giving feedback and advice to teacher candidates

The teacher candidates emphasised that they greatly valued the learning opportunity and it is recommended that efforts be made to extend the partnership between the Graduate School of Education and other secondary schools in order to provide and extend opportunities for skills-building which is of reciprocal value for both the teacher candidates and school students.

Learning Partnerships workshops have been happening in the Education program for over 10 years, initially in Education Policy, Schools and Society, then Social and Political Context, led by Helen Cahill and Bern Murphy. Last year there was also a workshop for Teach for Australia associates. The workshops also run in the medical program in which all 5th year medical students engage in a workshop with the school students as part of their training in adolescent health. A number of peer reviewed publications are available arising from prior research.

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